



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07486155 4

THE

ARTISTIC
TEMPERAMENT



BY

JANE


WARDLE

67

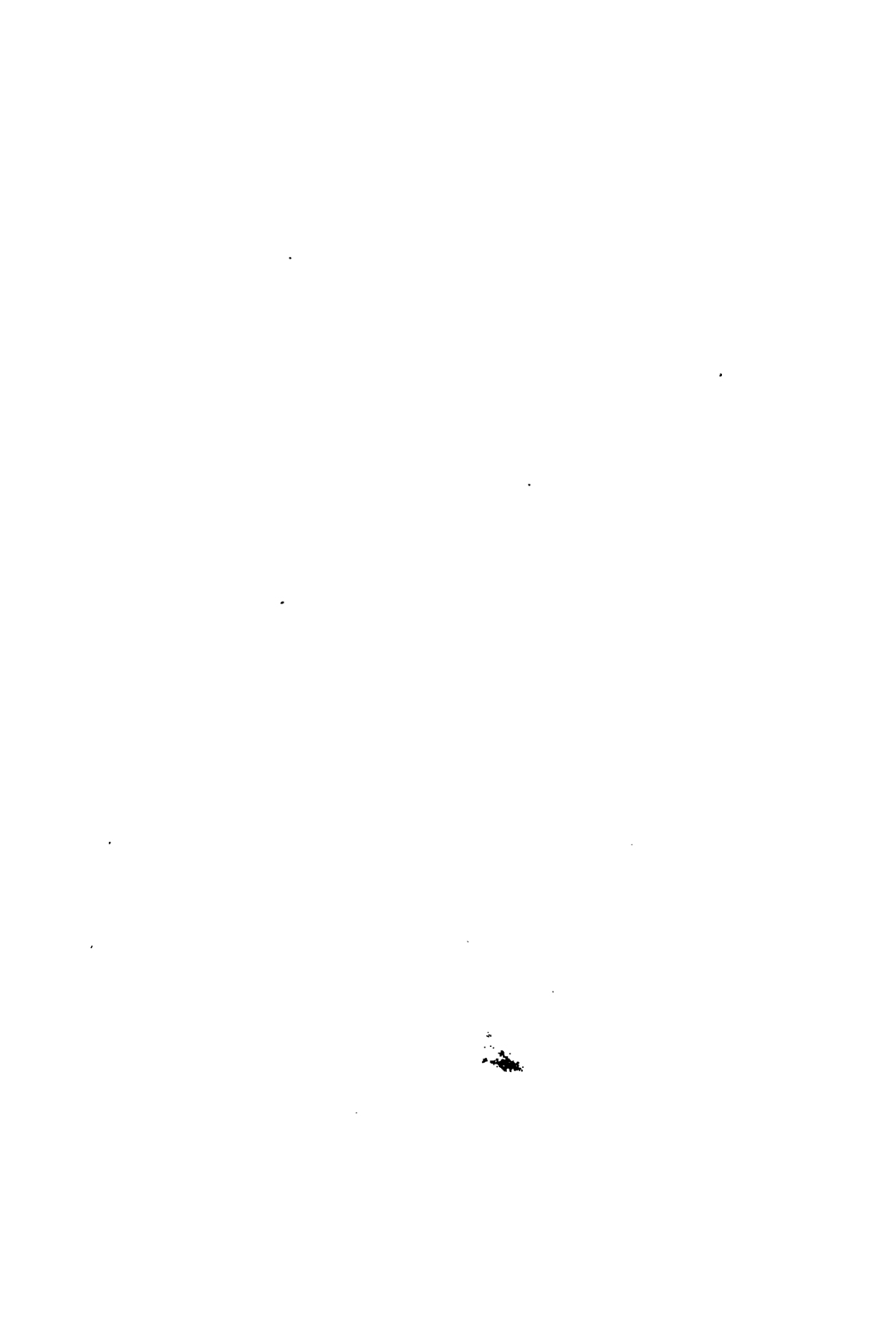




Copy



THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT



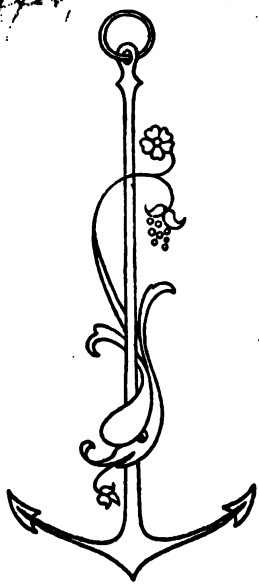
2/18/32
C. W.

THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

BY

JANE WARDLE (pseud.)

Hueffer, Alvinia Madox



NEW YORK
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

NEW YORK
McCLURE, PHILLIPS & CO.

MCMVII

CW

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
603974 A
ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R 1932 L

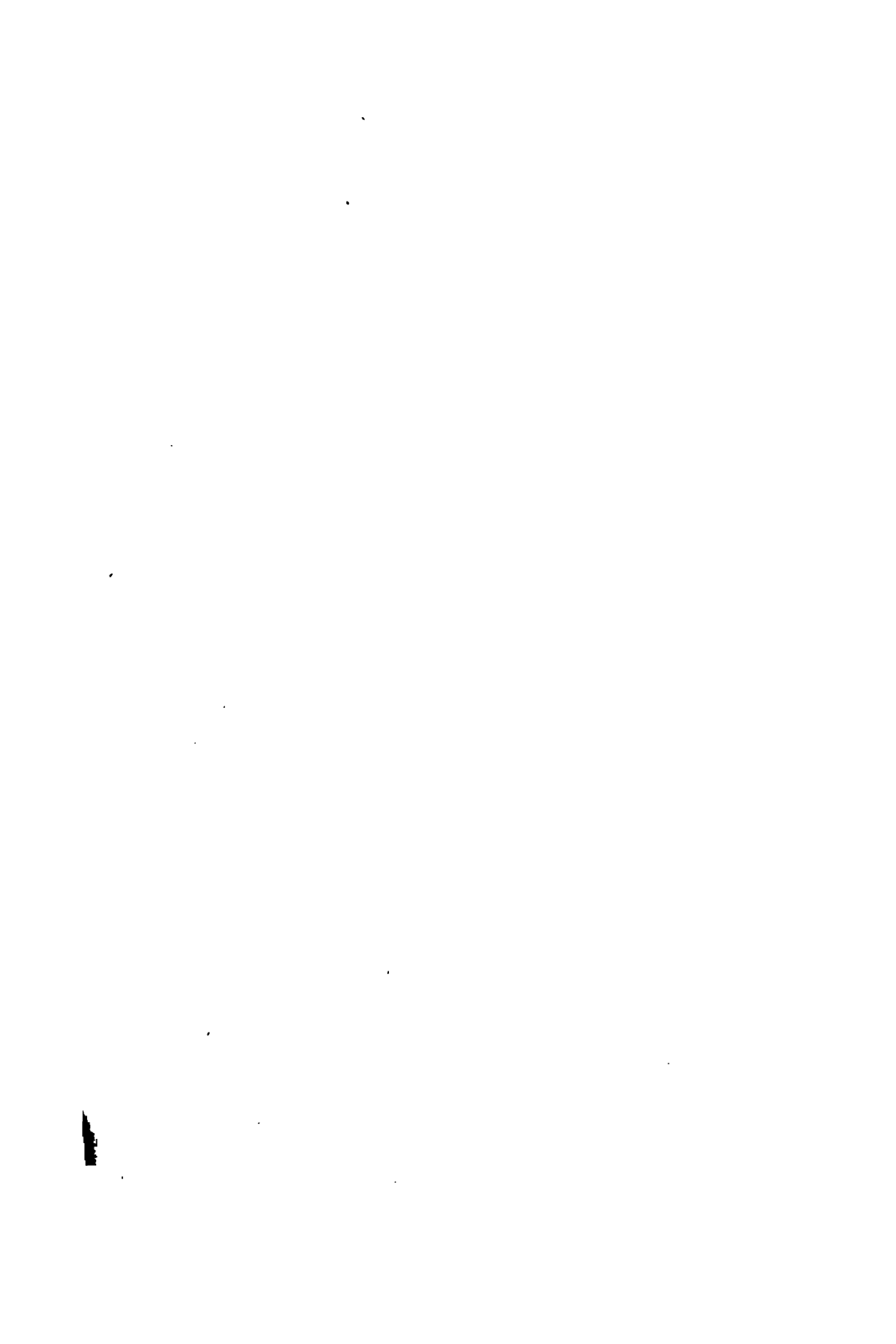
Copyright, 1907, by
McCLURE, PHILLIPS & CO.

NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS



THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

31X685



CHAPTER ONE

"BE a fool if you don't go," grunted Bodman. His chair creaked reproachfully as he tilted it back and stirred the fire with one foot perilously extended.

"That'll be the second chair you've smashed this week."

"Keep to the point," Bodman insisted, coming back to the perpendicular.

"Then I'm quite comfortable where I am. Thanks all the same."

Bodman sprang suddenly to his feet, turned, and as suddenly sat down again, bestriding his chair as a charger, his chin resting on the back rail. "Truth of the matter is, you're a lazy beast."

"I wish to goodness you were. Why can't you sit still? You as nearly as possible had my glass over."

"Look here—you preposterous ass—you say the man's got money." The back of the chair came sharply to the ground between his straddled knees; for a moment he loomed upstanding between Cartmel and the hearth, then dissolved into the shadows which overhung the studio beyond the firelight range.

"I don't know whether he has or not. How should I? He's got shops. Half-a-dozen of them. Shirts and ties and that sort of thing. You've seen them about Blaicklock's, you know."

"I know. One in the Strand. Why, the man's a

4 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

gold-mine." An illuminated face hung momentary in mid-air above the wicker lounge on which C was stretched. "And a pretty wife thrown means a couple of hundred for her portrait, very least. You'll be the champion ass of the class if you don't go."

"Keep your hair on, Thomas. Any time will do. It's a beastly night outside. Listen to the wind."

"That isn't wind. It's the motor-buses in the main road. I tell you, any time won't do. Just the kind of people who would be offended if you didn't turn up. Especially after you definitely promised. Think you're too proud to know them. And no doubt ask the collar-trade to meet you."

"That's the devil of it, Tommy. It would ruin me, morally. Aren't I conceited already? Besides, Blacklock's really quite a chap. He knows me better than that. I was at school with him, in the year 2. I've never had a better friend. Haven't I?"

"You weren't at school with his wife, and the portrait you'll have to paint, not his. A very easy way to get her knife into you. I've never seen a man, of the whole hosiery trade, who couldn't hold his own—"

"Don't be such a frantic nuisance. I'll go. I haven't got a shirt-stud."

There came a sound from the door as if a contemptuous bicycle-tire had suddenly burst.

"I haven't, I tell you. I dropped a brick on the floor—over there, where the Wentworths' on Monday. It's a long way. Hullo—what are you doing?"

A gust of cold air burst into the studio as Bodman opened an unseen door. It led into the tiny kitchen and so to the outer passage-way beyond.

"Rubens Studios" were a new block—a dozen in all—recently set up on the site of an earlier terrace of small houses in Rodney Street. The space once given over to their back-yards was now lined with young trees and optimistic gravel-beds where nothing flourished but Virginia-creeper. Each studio had a back-door giving upon this open passage, at the end of which was a wooden gate, leading into Byng Street beside the public-house at the corner. It thus provided a short cut to the King's Road and occasionally proved useful to the impecunious as a means of retreat while inconvenient callers wearied their wrists upon the bright brass knockers of the front-doors in Rodney Street.

"Silly fool!" lamented Cartmel, alone in the darkness. "Make me go in the end." He stretched his long legs over the end of the lounge and groped for his glass upon the table beside him.

"There you are," cried Bodman, returning in triumph. "A whole set of them. Cost me eighteen-pence only yesterday, with the card thrown in. But you're welcome. Every bit as good as gold—and no one would ever suspect a swell like you of wearing anything else."

"You forget that Blaicklock deals in them himself." He sat up on end. "I say—suppose you leave me alone, Bodman. I was just evolving a masterpiece when you came in and spoiled it."

"I know those masterpieces. Stephen, old man—do you realise that you've scarcely done a stroke of

6 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

work for three weeks? I know it isn't any business of mine—but——”

“What's the good—if I'm not in the mood for it? It's all very well for you to talk—when you're one of those lucky devils who can sit down to your work as regularly as if it was your dinner——”

“It is. That's——”

“And do so many hours right off, there and then, whether you feel like it or not. I wish to goodness I could—but I can't. You know I can't. Unless I'm in the right mood for it the stuff I turn out isn't fit for a pig to turn up his nose at. It only means I've got to do it all over again later. What's the good of it? It isn't true, either. Haven't I worked like a nigger at old Mosenthal? And finished him, too?”

“That was only because you hadn't any possible excuse to get out of doing it. And, anyway, it's no argument against your going to-night. Come now—up you get.”

“I tell you it's too late. I promised to call for the fellow. In the City. Cheapside or somewhere. At seven. It's past eight by now.”

“You know where he lives, I suppose?”

“Yes—worse luck. Somewhere in Upper Tooting. How in the world do you expect me to get there at this time of night?”

“Easily. You'll do it in half-an-hour in a hansom. It's only just beyond Clapham Junction somewhere. Or from Victoria by train. You could go in a bus, if you liked, if you weren't such an extravagant beggar.” He switched on the electric light.

There was little in the room to suggest an artist's studio, unless it were the great skylight which filled

the northern half of the high-pitched ceiling. There was but one modern painting visible, set upon an easel facing the entrance door. It was a portrait—just completed—of an elderly man, with a hawk-like Jewish face, handled with a boldness that was almost offensive. It realised, to conviction, a face that was anything but noble, yet gave to it a certain subtle nobility of suggestion—a nobility of evil, indeed—so that although the sitter might hold it an unflattering likeness of his features, he must yet feel flattered at the suggestion drawn from them. In curious contrast to this were the half-dozen paintings of an earlier day that hung on the grey walls—in faded frames of purer workmanship than that of our time, with but an occasional gleam of reminiscent gilding to point their moral. Then there were one or two bits of faïence, some German wood-carving, and a couple of old terracotta busts, picked up at odd times during Cartmel's travels; but all alike shrunk from observation rather than commanded it, and were set out with nothing of that conscious virtue that would have attended them in an "artistic" room. The floor was covered with a thick, soft carpet; there were an appropriate number of very easy-chairs; a grand-piano took up one corner, a well-filled music-cabinet was beside it, and a couple of rows of book-shelves beyond. Near the centre of the room was a small table, on which were the remains of a meal. In the wall opposite the fireplace was a door, leading to Cartmel's working-studio. Being intended for separate tenancies, there had originally been no connection between the two; but Stephen, on the strength of a lucrative commission, had taken both, to give himself more elbow-

8 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

room, as he put it, and pierced the dividing wall for easier passage.

Bodman, wandering restlessly across the room, came to a standstill before the portrait. He looked at it intently for a while, moving from side to side of it. "What splendid work you would do, Stephen," he said at last, "if only you would take yourself more seriously."

Stephen looked over his shoulder and wrinkled his forehead. "Looking at old Mosenthal? Makes you writhe, doesn't it?"

"It's one of the best things you've done—in its way."

"Don't try to be a hypocrite, man. It doesn't suit you. That's the work of a charlatan—and you know it, as well as I do."

"If only you would give up laughing at yourself."

"And let other people do it for me, eh?" A new gravity grew across his face. "It's no good, Boddy. I'm not the stuff that martyrs are made of. It's all very well for you, who don't care twopence whether you sell your stuff or keep it, as long as you're satisfied with it. It amuses you to starve, but it used to bore me horribly. I've got to make fools think my work is clever—and they do. With the result that I can run two studios and you——"

"Can't even afford one. That would be all right if you weren't clever. And your work, too. But——"

Stephen's gravity faded into mocking laughter.

"Don't you see, man, how that portrait solves one of the greatest problems of all time? You've seen old Mosenthal in the flesh, haven't you? He's your problem. The average old-fashioned ass would try

to tone him down a bit—knock half-a-cubit off his nose, take the twinkling greed out of his bleary little eyes, make him good-looking enough to pass in a crowd, and generally smooth all the character out of him. That was all very well in the dark ages of the nineteenth century, but you know as well as I do that it won't wash now. And Mosy knows, as well as either of us, that he isn't pretty and that the pretty-pretty's blown upon, anyway. And so do all Mosy's friends. It only annoys him and makes him feel like a fool. Which is just what he isn't."

"But nobody——"

"Lots, I assure you. Now, suppose he comes to you. You either refuse the job altogether—and a nice fat cheque with it—because it doesn't inspire you, or else you treat the poor man with the indecent brutality of the naked truth and make him your enemy for life."

"All this has nothing to do——"

"Yes, it has. Everything. Now it's my turn. I don't make him pretty. I don't libel him by making him look what he really is. I don't even make him out what he would like to be. I just turn him into the highest possible type of the thing he knows he is. My Mosy isn't a beauty—but he isn't merely ugly either. He isn't a pick-pocket—or a South African millionaire. He's a robber-baron. His nose has got the curve of the hawk's beak, instead of the poll-parrot's. He's got the glitter of the tiger in his eye—not of the jackal. You may dislike him—but you are bound to be afraid of him. And that's just what, lean-souled Mosenthal likes to think of himself. I tell you, Boddy, I am the portrait-painter of the age. I touch the spot. I shall go far. I——"

"There's no need for you to go any farther than Tooting to-night. Get up now. You can't put me off by talking nonsense."

Cartmel rose to his feet and yawned. "You mean well, Thomas Bodman, but you are totally lacking in the artistic temperament. Pour me out another drink and take one yourself. It's about all you're fit for. I'll go and clean myself while you are doing it. No—I won't, though." He sat down again, with an air of finality. "Adam was smiling quite horribly when he called me this morning, and that always means it's going to be an unlucky day. Besides, Tooting's too much of a good thing in this weather."

Bodman turned upon him with fierce vivacity.

"Don't you see, you incredible ass, that it's just because it is Tooting that you've got to go? The chap wouldn't live there unless he was rich enough to afford it. You've either got heaps, or none at all, if you live in such a place. You've got to go—so there's an end of it."

Stephen groaned piteously, but rose obediently to his feet and ascended, without more words, to his bedroom. He was accustomed to speak of it as his bird-cage, which indeed it somewhat suggested. It was built into the upper angle of the studio, clinging, as it were, to the ceiling above the front door, supported by two iron columns and approached by a little flight of stairs which ran nakedly up the wall, the whole forming a veritable triumph in space economy.

For some twenty minutes Bodman waited, pacing the studio, and shaking his head angrily at the portrait of Mr. Mosenthal whenever he passed before it.

When at last Stephen reappeared in evening dress, he was received with ungrudging admiration. "By Jove! That will fetch them! Shouldn't wonder if they called a new collar after you, or something. You look as if you had been a waiter all your life." Cartmel was, indeed, one of those men who look their best in sombre black and white. His long limbs and slender build suggested, as a matter of fact, rather a youthful cavalry officer than the popular idea of a painter—an illusion assisted by his small and carefully tended moustache and his habitual expression of well-groomed indifference to all and sundry.

"The victim garnished for the sacrifice," he grumbled, selecting one from a row of overcoats which lined the little porch. "By the way, before I forget it—I wish you'd look in next door and see if the cloth over my 'Narcissus' wants moistening. Haven't seen it since I had my last go at it, have you? It's no end good."

"Why in the world can't you stick to one thing at a time?"

"Because I am a universal genius, Mr. Bodman, Esquire. And you are mad with jealousy."

"I suppose you mean——"

"I don't mean anything except that the Lord only knows where I shall find a hansom to take me to Tooting to-night; not to speak of bringing me back again. Are you going out the back way? You might turn the light off after me."

As he opened the front door he looked back with a smile. "I know you mean well, but don't you imagine that anything is coming of this wild-goose chase. For one thing, I've already promised Blacklock to

12 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

paint his wife's portrait for him—as a wedding present.”

“Of course. You would have.”

“I owe him several good turns, for one thing; and his wife is as pretty as they make them, for a second; and I've got the artistic temperament, for a third.”

“Damn fool temperament, you mean.”

“Same thing. You've often said so. Good-night.”

CHAPTER TWO

"THE LAURELS" was the twelfth house from the High Road, on the left-hand side. It was of red brick, in two storeys, double-fronted, with a neo-medixæval gable on the right and a machicolated turret balancing it on the left—in which features it exactly reproduced all the other houses in Brabazon Road. It stood about six feet back from the pavement, behind a low wall topped with an ornamental iron railing. The railing was supported by a privet-hedge, out of which sprang, on either side of the gate, a laburnum-tree, and a pink hawthorn. On one side of the entrance-porch grew a Virginia-creeper, on the other a cotoneaster. The front door was mostly of coloured glass—"cathedral glass," the agents called it—arranged in geometrical designs and looking very gay indeed when the hall-lamp was lit. It was an eminently respectable house in an eminently respectable road which gained a certain distinction from its double frontages in a district where single fronts are the rule.

Although an unlikely abode for a man of large means, "The Laurels" had its advantages. One of them was the back-garden. It was a very small back-garden; a mile nearer town it would have been called a yard. It had a little grass-plot in the centre and little flower-beds at the sides. Old Mrs. Reynolds was fond of tending them, and they brought forth

14 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

astonishing crops of marigolds and tobacco-plants. It was delightfully open, only a low wooden fence dividing it from the paddock and grounds of one of the few large old houses which still remain to testify to the past grandeurs of Upper Tooting. A row of handsome elms bordered the fence, and cows, grazing in the paddock, gave it a pleasant flavour of rurality. There was a pond, too, not far from the fence, and rushes and wild-flowers still grew around it as lustily as though there were not a chimney-pot within a mile. It is true that this rural solitude only existed on sufferance. The large old house had long been tenantless. The cows were nomads, temporarily pastured there by a dairyman; huge placards, ranged along the walls of the estate wherever they might catch the public eye, set forth its potentialities as an eligible building site, "suitable for the erection of medium-sized property."

The Blaicklocks had tenanted "The Laurels" ever since it was first built. They had moved in even before the roadway was finished, when it was still but a wilderness of mud and sand, with fateful curbstones flung like vedettes in advance, to outline its future progress across the doomed nursery-garden. Barely five years had elapsed, but Brabazon Road was already become almost an elderly thoroughfare—one of the most venerable, indeed, in a district where new streets and terraces have a discomposing habit of springing up like mushrooms, almost in a night—so that where you might last week have passed an old garden-wall backed by a row of ancient trees, you would find to-day a "Parade" of shops already tenanted and clamorous for custom, with long red rows

of residential streets running off behind them towards infinity.

John Blacklock had prospered in his affairs since the time of his marriage, and might now have well afforded a more imposing home. His two shops had increased to eleven; he had a factory somewhere at the back of Milk Street where he made much of what he retailed; he was become one of those who may always count upon a welcoming smile from the bank-manager. But he had no thought of leaving "The Laurels." It was the home to which he had brought his young wife, and in it the happiest years of his life had been spent. It was sufficiently roomy for his needs, including the housing of Delia's mother and sister. It was quiet, for Brabazon Road led nowhere in particular, and tradesmen's carts were almost the sole wheeled traffic. The electric tram-cars in the High Road made it convenient of access from the City. It was moderate in rent, yet not a house that he need feel ashamed of—though he was too busy a man to cultivate acquaintances. It was in a healthy district. Finally, Delia had never expressed herself as other than completely satisfied. For all these reasons John Blacklock, despite his growing fortunes, remained at "The Laurels," and was happy.

Delia, Mrs. Reynolds and Carrie were sitting together in the drawing-room. It was on the right-hand side of the hall as you entered; it was of fair size, with two windows, and not in itself remarkable. Its furnishings and decorations, on the other hand, were somewhat unusual, suggesting an endeavour at compromise between two schools of thought. It was hung with paper of plain blue, the woodwork painted

white. There was a picture-rail, and, above it, a frieze, on which maidens of neo-Botticellian type disported among orange-groves. The curtains and other hangings, including a portière and the "draperies" of the mantelpiece, were of Morris chintz—an intricate design of orange-foliage, giving countenance to the frieze. There were two examples of "Arts and Crafts" furniture in evidence—an oaken arm-chair with a rush seat, the back and arms ornamented with heart-shaped incisions lined with blue enamels, and a small green-stained writing-desk, having four columns rising above it, one at each corner, upon each of which an "Art" vase was perilously poised. Neither chair nor desk was adapted for use, but there could be no doubt as to their artistic worth. The rest of the furniture was of the kind originally invoiced as "one saddle-bag suite," but now modestly disguised itself beneath covers of the aforesaid Morris chintz.

The general spirit of compromise reached its height on and above the draped mantelpiece. At either end stood a mid-Victorian "lustre" with glittering glass prism-pendants—the wedding-gift of Blaicklock's great-aunt Mary, since deceased. Next to them were two imitation Tanagra statuettes; next to them again a pair of Pilkington vases, and in the centre a large French marble clock supporting a gilt group of Cupid and Psyche and bearing an inscription setting forth that it had been presented to John Blaicklock, Esq., on the occasion of his wedding, by his obliged and grateful employés. Above the clock was an oil-painting—the portrait of a stern-faced man of middle age, the father of John Blaicklock. It dated

from the late fifties; the hair was brushed very stiffly back from the forehead, the auburn whiskers were very carefully curled; one hand was thrust into the breast, the other rested on a table; a crimson curtain with gold tassels closed in the background. The picture had been recently cleaned and revarnished; the canvas was impossibly shiny, the ornamental mouldings of the frame very highly gilded. Flanking the portrait were two square, dark patches on the wall-paper, whence other pictures had been removed. They were partly covered by Della Robbia plaques, copied and reduced from Italian originals. One was a Madonna and Child, within a garland of fruit and flowers; the other, one of the children in swaddling clothes from the façade of the Innocenti at Florence.

Two electroliers of bronzed metal supporting globes of tinted and engraved glass sprang from the wall just below the plaques. Their light was reinforced by that from a standard lamp beside the sofa, which stood at right angles to the fireplace. The lamp wore a petticoat of yellow silk and a waistband of the same colour. At intervals around the walls were four Oriental plates, a colour-print of Sir Joshua Reynolds' "Infant Samuel," two of the Arundel Society's reproductions of works by Florentine Masters, a photogravure of "The Soul's Awakening," and a coloured reproduction of Whistler's portrait of his mother. Modestly lurking on a table in a corner was a glass-case of stuffed birds; a smartly bound edition of Ruskin shared another with odd copies of art magazines and a large gramophone, the brazen trumpet of which stuck out stiffly from the wall.

An unseen cuckoo-clock—it was in the hall—struck nine, its voice having a suggestion of hiccoughs. Mrs. Reynolds laid her copy of *The Weekly Christian* carefully upon the table before her, took off her spectacles, and wiped them. She cast a guilty glance towards Delia, and stealthily felt the top of her head, to ascertain if the smart cap with the mauve ribbons had slipped to one side. In so doing she lost track of her spectacles, which had fallen into her lap. When she had found and carefully rewiped them, she gazed comprehensively around the room. As her eyes came to the wall above the mantelpiece something unusual in its arrangement caught her attention.

“Why, Delia,” she cried, in a thin old voice that yet had something pleasant in it, “whatever has become of the ‘Valley of the Dee’? Yes—and the ‘Mill by the River’ has gone, too.”

Delia, hearing the voice, looked up from her magazine. “A Harmony in Purple and Green,” she murmured absently. Understanding grew gradually into her large grey eyes. “Oh, yes. I had them taken down this afternoon.”

“But, Delia”—Mrs. Reynolds’s voice was tremulous but determined—“they were dear William’s favourite pictures. He was never tired of looking at them. They used to hang in the sitting-room—long before you were born—where he could always see them when he had his meals. The Bateses, who lived in the corner house in Bridge Street before it was pulled down—gave them to him before we were married. I do hope you haven’t—”

Delia raised her eyes again, as absently as before.

“I have had them put on the top landing for to-

night. You can have them in your bedroom to-morrow if you like. I couldn't let Mr. Cartmel——”

Mrs. Reynolds was wounded in one of her tenderest points. “I don't know what you mean,” she retorted with dignity. “Every one who has seen them has thought very highly of them. Why—even your own husband——”

“John is not a judge of pictures. And these are only chromos.”

Mrs. Reynolds was proceeding to further protest when her elder daughter interrupted her. “Your cap is all crooked again, mother. Let me put it right for you.” Mrs. Reynolds sped a scared hand to the side of her forehead and silently resigned herself to Carrie's ministrations.

Delia rose abruptly to her feet, went to the window, and drew the curtains aside. She gazed out into the quiet street, waited for a few moments, then, with a gesture of impatience, returned to the sofa.

“John is late to-night,” said her mother, scenting a conversational opening. “The cuckoo-clock struck nine ten minutes ago, and that means it must be nearly half-past eight by now. Perhaps I had better see if Annie is ready with his mutton. He will be so tired, poor dear!”

She rose with unexpected nimbleness, and was making rapidly for the door when Carrie's hand detained her.

“Sit down, for goodness' sake! You are exactly like a Jack-in-the-Box. John has had something to eat in the City.”

Mrs. Reynolds cast a guilty glance towards the sofa.

“But I told Annie to cut some slices off the mutton

and keep them warm, in case he should be hungry when he comes in."

"You shouldn't interfere, then. You know Delia doesn't like it. And you've got your cap crooked again, already."

"I wonder what he will be like," murmured Delia, some minutes later, speaking as if to herself. "Oh, I wish they would come!"

Mrs. Reynolds, after her spell of enforced silence, looked up eagerly. "Who, dear?"

"Who? Mr. Cartmel, of course."

Mrs. Reynolds leant back in her chair and meditated aloud. "There was a Mrs. Cartmel used to keep the post-office in Cloister Street, just before Carrie was born. She used to sell stationery, too. I should think it was very likely a relation."

Delia replied only by a snort of disgust.

"You are very rude to me, Delia, though I *am* your mother." Without waiting for an answer she made suddenly for the door, eluding Carrie's vigilance. "Perhaps it is time I saw about John's mutton," she announced as she disappeared. Carrie bent her eyes to her sewing again, and silence fell upon the room, save for the soft rustle of traffic from the High Road.

"I do hope nothing has happened to stop his coming," came at length from the sofa. "I expect he has any number of invitations. I do hope he won't think us too terribly dull and uninteresting."

Delia's artistic leanings did not as a rule affect her dress. The first news of Cartmel's probable visit had happened to coincide, however, with her deliberations over the fashioning of a new frock. She was now

accordingly gowned in what her dressmaker described, to her confidantes, as "one of them new-fangled Reform styles," which Delia had chosen in accordance with an article on "The Ethics of Dress," written and illustrated by the well-known authority, Mr. John Festung, in *The High Art Magazine*. It was of sober green, moderately shapeless, and guiltless of a waist, but as Delia was very tall and slender it could not altogether disguise the graceful lines of her body, and harmonised sufficiently well with its present background of orange-leaved chintz. It was the first time she had put it on, and she did not yet feel altogether at ease in it, the more so that it was cut lower in the neck than those she was accustomed to. Nor had its reception at the eyes of her mother and sister been at all reassuring, Mrs. Reynolds openly, if timorously, murmuring against Fate, while Carrie, though silent, had expressed even more rebellious sentiments in her eyebrows.

Delia sought in the wallet which now served her for pocket for the sheet of paper on which, at the local Free Library, she had copied out of *Who's Who* the extract referring to Cartmel, and conned it over for the hundredth time "'Born in 1879,'" she murmured, as though learning it by rote. "Then he is eight years younger than John. I wonder how they came to be at the same school. 'Studied—Royal Academy Schools, Paris, pupil of Beaumarchais'—yes—'First painting—Royal Academy—member, North British Art Club'—I think I remember all that. 'Painting of "Cerise Muff" purchased by French Government. Chief works, "Harmony in Purple and Green"'—that's the one I was just read-

ing about in that back number of *The Real Lady* that John brought home yesterday, Carrie. A woman in a purple kimono, sitting in a garden, wasn't it? 'The Scarlet Petticoat,' 'The Picnic Party.' Oh, dear! I wish I knew more about it."

She fumbled among the sofa-cushions for *The Real Lady*.

"Didn't I show you this, Carrie? Here's a long article, all about his work." She ran her eyes down the page. "Listen to what they say about him. 'Our greatest painter of imaginative realities—technique fascinatingly elementary.' I wonder what that means? 'Thrilling with nobly realised intuitions.' Oh, dear! I wish they'd come, if they're coming."

Long hours of that City toil from which Delia had escaped by her early marriage had driven all the bloom from Carrie's cheeks, so that she was now a pale shadow of her sister, differing in all but feature. Even her dark hair had lost its waving lustre; her eyes were increasingly weak, so that she must wear pince-nez continually; she had bad teeth, and, year by year, she became more subject to nervous irritability. Yet she was still a young woman—but a year senior to her more fortunate sister—and, save in the way of comparison, by no means ill-looking. Both had, indeed, inherited good looks from their West-country forebears, for the Reynolds family had been noted for its comeliness in the days when it still held up its head among the smaller yeomanry of Devon, ere ill-fortune and agricultural depression had driven its last male representative townwards. Carrie was, again, of a naturally sunny disposition, and that her tongue had recently acquired something of a tang might be con-

doned both by the unwholesome conditions of her employment and the difficulty of her position as a member, not altogether self-supporting, of her younger sister's household. As it so happened, though, her capacity for caustic comment had, if anything, increased, since her engagement, some six months previously, to a young man employed, like herself, in the City.

"What a fuss you make about it!" She removed a pin from between her lips. "One would think you lived in a desert island, the way you go on."

"So I might, as far as ever seeing anybody that is worth seeing goes. I have always so longed to know distinguished people—who have done things—things that matter. And now——" She gave herself a little hug of anticipatory rapture.

"You have been quite crazy about artists ever since that absurd man at the School of Art told you you had the artistic temperament." Carrie's voice was almost as colourless as her face, and there was in it the faint suggestion of a Cockney twang, from which Delia, perhaps because she had had more leisure to cope with it, was altogether free except in moments of strong excitement.

"Or, perhaps," continued Carrie, "it is only since you found out that we are descended from the great—what's-his-name?—Sir Joshua."

This speculation, upon which Carrie embarked whenever she felt that her sister needed to be disciplined, was chronologically inexact. Delia's sudden whim to undertake a course of lessons at the local School of Art had been subsequent to—and, indeed, consequent upon, her theory of her own artistic descent. Her

interest in Sir Joshua had originated in a chance article in one of the sixpenny popular magazines which formed the staple literary fare at "The Laurels." Some extremely unreliable reminiscences and speculations on the part of her mother had next suggested the attractive theory, to which she had ever since clung, not the less firmly that Carrie's frank comment forced her to keep it to herself. She had soon wearied of the practical side of art, even though her instructor, seduced, it might be, by the glory of her dark-lashed eyes, had prophesied great things from her perseverance. Instead she devoted all her energies to the reform of the drawing-room furniture, sacrificing to it many of her husband's most cherished belongings, he being too devoted to risk either criticism or remonstrance.

Carrie waited a little to note the effect of her well-tried jibe, but Delia only smiled with irritating condescension. She tried again. "Done something that matters! Hasn't John done something that matters, I should like to know? I'm sure the way he toils at his business—to make money for you to spend on all this absurd frippery——"

Delia raised her eyebrows. "Business! You absurd child!" She laughed merrily and relapsed among the cushions.

Carrie's pince-nez flashed ominously. "How can you be so disloyal, Delia? John is ever so much too good for you. And he worships the very ground you walk upon."

Delia shrugged her shapely shoulders. "That's the worst of it. If only he would make love to some one else—you, for instance—or get drunk, or beat me, or

do something that wasn't so desolatingly good. One does get so tired of undiluted virtue." She yawned angelically, and glanced at Carrie from the ambush of her eyelashes.

The shot told. "It's downright wicked of you to say such things. Think of all John has done for you. And for us——"

"Don't lose your temper, dear. I am never likely to forget it, with you and mother always dinning it into my ears. Until I want to scream, sometimes. What a pity it is that John didn't marry you instead of me. You'd have made him a much better wife. And I've always thought you were in love with him." The door opened stealthily, and Mrs. Reynolds entered. Her cap was now rakishly perched over her left ear, and round her shoulders was a disreputable little grey shawl, dimming the glories of her black silk dress. In her hands she bore, with exaggerated care, a pie-dish covered over with a plate. "Both those girls had forgotten all about John's mutton," she announced importantly. "So I have cut him some nice slices myself. I think we had better keep it warm on the hob in here. There is scarcely any fire in the kitchen." Delia sprang to her feet with an air of tragic desperation. But a kindly Providence averted the storm from Mrs. Reynolds's white head. At that moment the garden gate clicked.

CHAPTER THREE

THERE was no time for reproaches. Carrie seized her mother and led her, volubly protesting, from the room, ere the incoming latchkey had found its lock. Delia, after a hasty digital examination of her hair, reclined once more upon her sofa, a charming picture of unconscious repose.

John Blaicklock was before all things cautious. "Are you there, dearest?" he inquired before he entered.

"Is it you, John?" she asked very sweetly; "I am in here."

"Here I am at last. Did you think I was lost?" He spoke slowly, as considering each word before he uttered it. He closed the door carefully behind him and stood for a moment before it, so that his figure was silhouetted against the white paint. He was a man below the average height, though sturdily built, the head overlong for its width, the eyes light hazel, the hair already thin, in colour approaching to sandy, inclining to grey at the temples. He wore a moustache, thin and stubbly, which he endured only in deference to his wife's expressed dislike of the mutton-chop whiskers he had preferred until his marriage, but sacrificed before the altar. He was neatly dressed in dark-toned clothes, which yet did not seem to fit him; he wore a turned-down collar and an inconspicuous black tie arranged in a bow; his boots were square-

toed and solid; he was still struggling to remove one of his gloves, and his slight consequent embarrassment showed itself in a curious net-work of small wrinkles across his forehead. His was a good face, honourable and kindly; his habitual smile had ploughed perceptible wrinkles around his mouth. But that mouth was not without its potentialities of obstinacy, even, it might be, of sudden passion or of cruelty. Tucked awkwardly beneath his arms he was carrying two brown-paper parcels of uncompromising shape, which added to his difficulties with the glove.

"Where is he?" cried Delia sharply, as he closed the door. "Hasn't he come?"

"Cartmel, do you mean? Something must have kept him. He was to have called for me at Milk Street, at seven. I waited until nearly eight. We shall probably have a letter by the last post, explaining it."

Having conquered the glove, he came towards the sofa, his eyes as they rested on his wife having in them something of the expression which a dog turns towards a beloved master, so trustingly tender was it. Delia shrank angrily from his lips. "Don't kiss me. I don't want you to."

He straightened his back, his face full of wistful surprise.

"It is only what I might have expected," cried Delia, almost in tears.

"I am very sorry you are disappointed, dearest." He offered her the parcels which he carried. "I have brought you one of those French rock-melons you are so fond of. And some more records for the gramophone."

She waved them angrily aside. "Take them away."

I don't want them. Of course I am disappointed. Bitterly. I—oh——”

He lingered irresolutely beside the sofa, clasping his despised offerings.

“He may very likely come still. I daresay something turned up at the last moment to stop his coming to the City. But he knows this address and very likely he may come here direct. He would almost certainly have let us know if he wasn't coming.”

Carrie entered as he spoke. “It is you, John. Have you had a hard day? You do look tired.”

He turned to her as a welcome means of escape from an impossible position. “It has been rather worrying. I have been going through the books in Oxford Street. I have suspected a leakage there for some time. And I found out to-day that Axtell—the new branch-manager, you know—has been robbing me ever since he came. I made him confess everything to-day.”

It was curious to see how the tenderness died from his face as he spoke, and the lips straightened almost to grimness.

“How horrible for you! Have you lost much?”

He shook his head. “Nothing that matters.” He was a poor hand at the game. He shot an appellent glance at Delia, but she appeared to have lost herself within the pages of a magazine—and he could not know that she had already mastered its contents from cover to cover.

“What have you done about it?”

“Done? Given him in charge, of course.”

“He's got a wife and children, hasn't he?”

The lips relaxed no whit. “He should have thought of that before.”

He turned to Delia again, and at once his expression softened.

"By the way, dearest, I met Jennings in the car coming home. They talk of coming in to-night, to hear the gramophone."

"I hope you have got enough whisky, then. He always drinks at least a bottleful. Perhaps it's just as well that Mr. Cartmel isn't coming, after all."

She half lifted the magazine, but the wistfulness of her husband's face made her relent. She rose quickly to her feet, overtopping him by almost a head, and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "No. Don't touch me. You will ruffle my hair. Don't you see I've got my new dress on. How does it suit me? Carrie doesn't like it, for some reason."

She smiled maliciously over her husband's head to where Carrie, having resumed her sewing, was sitting in her former place.

"She doesn't know what she is talking about," he answered rapturously. "It is charming—lovely. You look like—like a queen in it."

"I wasn't really angry with you. Only cross because I was disappointed. Now you may bring a chair up to the fire and amuse me. I've been horribly dull all day. Without you," she added, as a manifest afterthought.

He hesitated. "I'm afraid I mustn't, dearest. I had to bring some of the books back with me. I shall have to finish going through them to-night. This affair of Axtell, you know. I ought to get started at once, as the Jenningses, and perhaps Cartmel, are coming. You—you wouldn't like me to work in here?"

"Oh, pray don't let me keep you. You had better work in the breakfast-room. I should light the gas-fire, if I were you. Mother insisted on warming up some mutton for you, if you care to have it, I don't know if you had anything in the City."

The curious wrinklins spread across his forehead again. "I do wish you would not let her do such things, dearest. It only tires her. Besides, what are the servants for?"

Delia raised her eyebrows in supreme unconcern. "Chiefly to break the vegetable dishes I should say." He did not venture to pursue the subject farther, and slowly retreated, still bearing his rejected gifts. As he came to the door he stopped and turned.

"I forgot to tell you"—his voice was more hopeful—"Something that I know will please you. Cartmel wants to paint your portrait. I had a note from him this morning about it. He said nothing about not coming, by the way."

Delia sprang to attention as though obeying a military command. "To paint my portrait!" she cried, in joyful incredulity. "But—he doesn't even know what I look like. I might be a regular old frump, for all he knows."

"He wants to give it to me as what he calls a belated wedding-present. I happened to say something about our wedding-day, and I suppose that put it into his head. I oughtn't really to accept it, but he was always the most impulsively generous creature living. He knows what you are like. I showed him your photograph."

"Which one? Not that——?"

"Yes. The one I am so fond of. I always keep it on

my desk at the office—and he happened to be in there.”

“That horrid thing—with the machine? Oh—then I suppose you told him that I used to be your typist before we were married.”

Once more his brow wrinkled in perplexed foreboding.

“I—I didn’t think you would mind. It is quite the best you ever had taken.”

Delia did not trust herself to answer, but her foot beat an eloquent tattoo upon the carpet.

“I hope John didn’t forget to mention that you were descended from the great Sir Joshua before you were married,” interjected Carrie, with calm acidity. “That would have made it all right again, wouldn’t it?”

For the second time that evening the clicking of the garden-gate acted as Providence. “I shouldn’t wonder if that was Cartmel,” said Blacklock. He crossed to the window and peered cautiously round the curtains. “No—it is Robert.” His voice had a trace of disappointment. “Were you expecting him to-night, Carrie?”

“He nearly always does call round on Thursday. I will go for a walk with him, if you would rather.”

“Not at all,” said Delia, with suspicious sweetness.

“He will be excellent company for the Jenningses. But I do wish he wouldn’t always knock as if he were the undertaker come to call for the body,” she added, as the sound of the knocker echoed through the room. “It’s time I got started with those books,” threw in Blacklock. He went out, carefully closing the door behind him. There was the murmuring of voices in

the hall, the front door was closed, and Mr. Manwell came into the room. He was a tall, thin young man, with a pronounced stoop and narrow shoulders. At the first glance you would have taken him for a typical specimen of the anæmic sub-section of his class—varying only in minor details from the average of the many hundreds who crowd the City tea-shops at the luncheon-hour. His chief distinction lay in his eyes, which were unusually closely set. Under ordinary circumstances they were so dark as to appear almost black, but under the stress of any excitement a yellow light grew across the iris, giving him something of the appearance of one of the felidæ. He was, nevertheless, a young man of quiet, almost crushed appearance, having about him the suggestion of settled melancholy, to which his lank, black hair, dark, sallow skin and drooping lips and eyelids contributed not a little. Dressed in the costume of an Andalusian brigand he might have been picturesque; in the short swallow-tails of clerkly life he seemed a tragi-comic anachronism. Carrie rose to meet him, and they interchanged the usual greetings, not without a certain significance. He then sighed deeply and approached the sofa. He extended towards Delia a bony hand with prominent wrist-bones and an unexpectedly pink skin, so that it looked as if it had been recently washed in very cold water. "I have brought you a book that I thought you might like to read," he said, in melancholy tones which matched his face. "It is by Rossetti. Poems."

"I seem to know the name," said Delia. "But I thought he was an artist. He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes. He is dead," replied Mr. Manwell. He drew

a chair towards where Carrie was seated, but kept his eyes deferentially upon Delia.

She took the volume—it was a cheap collected edition—and turned over the pages idly. But it was difficult to ignore for long the fixity of Mr. Manwell's gaze. She flung the book aside and looked at him malevolently. "Do for goodness' sake say something. This isn't a Quakers' meeting."

Mr. Manwell cleared his throat and turned the colour of brick-dust. "I was reading a very interesting article in *Literary Bits* this afternoon," he said, recovering control of his features, "upon the decline of the modern novel. The writer believes——"

"Be quiet!" commanded Delia, "I think I heard the gate go. Perhaps he really has come, after all. Listen!"

Mr. Manwell turned his embarrassed gaze upon his fiancée, who came to his relief. "Where have you been this evening, Robert?" she inquired in a low voice. "You are later than usual."

A sharp double-knock, three times repeated, at the front door, sent a glow of anticipation into Delia's cheeks. She shot a dazzling smile at the distracted Mr. Manwell. "What was it you were saying about novels?" she asked, settling herself among the cushions. Then, before he could reply, "Tell me about this Mr. Rossetti. Is he the one who paints?"

Mr. Manwell felt himself upon safe ground, the work of Rossetti having formed the subject of a Polytechnic lecture which he had attended so lately as the previous evening. "He was one of the greatest——" he began. But he was again cut short, by the entry of John Blacklock, ushering in the Jenningses.

Delia was by this time inured to disappointment, and received her new guests with all the amiability that the occasion demanded. Mr. Jennings advanced first, smiling ingratiatingly, and bowing stiffly at short intervals, as though working upon a hinge situated somewhere in the small of his back. "Hope I see you well," he remarked, and at once retired into the background, to converse with his host about gramophones and the weather. Mrs. Jennings had been younger, but she had an undeniable figure and a languishing smile, both of which might have been borrowed from the same fashion-plate. She said nothing whatever, leaving her smile to speak for her, and upon being piloted to a place on the sofa beside Delia, busied herself in choosing the attitude calculated to display to the best advantage her figure and her suspiciously golden hair. Delia was thinking hard for something to say when the expected happened. The jangle of an approaching bell and the scuffling of horses' hoofs, suddenly arrested, sounded from the street.

No one else noticed it, for already all eyes and ears were centred on the gramophone, which Blaicklock was making ready for action. He had brought it home only three days before, as a present for Delia, and the joy which he took in explaining its mechanism to all and sundry as yet showed no signs of abatement. With beating heart Delia waited for the sound of the knocker. "Rat-tat-tetat-tat." He had come! She turned a beaming face towards her silent neighbour and plunged headlong into the servant problem.

CHAPTER FOUR

To enter, alone, a roomful of strangers, is always something of an ordeal. To do so in evening-dress, finding your predecessors in morning garb; to be uncertain of the identity of your hostess; to realise that, upon your entrance, the conversation has died into surprised silence, and that you are the common target for an uncertain number of eyes, all these things combine to make it a penance. Stephen stood for a moment, hesitating, in the doorway, mentally reviling Bodman. Then his host, who had been bending over the gramophone with his back to the door, looked up, hearing a slight exclamation from Carrie, and advanced with a welcoming smile.

“I am so delighted you have found your way here. I had almost given you up. Come. Let me introduce you to my wife.”

Stephen felt a momentary uneasiness as to which of the ladies seated on the sofa should prove his hostess. The one nearer to him, with the figure, seemed of the more suitable age. Could he, misled by an old photograph, have volunteered to paint her portrait? His doubts resolved as Blacklock led him past the siren to the pretty girl with the dark hair and grey eyes who sat beyond her.

Before a word could be spoken a sudden strident wheezing came from a corner, making every one start as though a gun had been fired. It resolved itself into

the gramophone, which proceeded to grind out a duet from the latest musical comedy, in a voice that sounded as though the performers had been drinking. Mr. Manwell, in his anxiety to stare at Stephen, had twisted suddenly round, his coat-tail had caught some part of the machinery and thus precipitated the catastrophe. Mr. Jennings tried to turn a laugh into a cough, Delia signalled frantically to her husband. Stephen, catching the social agony in her eyes, exorcised it with a ready smile. "Please don't stop it," he entreated, "it's such an awfully jolly tune." So they waited passively, until the last note died away and the performance closed with another husky wheeze, as though the machine were congratulating itself upon a duty well fulfilled. Stephen, thus given the opportunity of considering his hostess at his leisure, freely forgave alike the gramophone and Bodman.

"Do forgive me for turning up at such an appalling time," he said, when, having been formally introduced to the rest of the guests, he subsided into a chair before the sofa. "To be quite candid, a man came in just as I was going to start, that I couldn't very well get rid of. One of those foolish fellows who buy pictures," he added more confidentially.

"I am so very glad that you managed to get here at all," she answered, her expression seconding her words.

"I thought the best thing was to come here direct. Had bad luck with my cab, too. The man didn't know the way—he wasn't over and above sober to start with—and we have been wandering about Clapham Common for the last hour or so. I always feel

so helpless in a hansom." He directed the last sentence towards Mrs. Jennings, in a well-meant endeavour to include her in the conversation. But she only drew herself up, as though to emphasise the lines of her figure, and smiled at him languishingly.

The frosty silence which had entered the room with the newcomer withstood even the efforts of the gramophone. Mr. Manwell had retired into a chair against the wall, whence he could obtain an uninterrupted view of Delia, at whom he was gazing with speechless determination. Mr. Jennings, the large checks on whose coat and the gaudy pattern of whose necktie gave him the appearance of a bookmaker rather than that of a business man, was smoothing out with the flat of his palm the well-oiled lock of hair which, springing from above his right ear, was carefully trained across to the left, covering the otherwise bald dome of his head like a trellis-vine. In the other hand he still bore a pair of crumpled and dirty brown gloves—his inseparable companions when from home, although no one had ever seen him wearing them. He gazed reflectively the while at Cartmel's shirt-front, his lips pursed up as though he were whistling internally, so that the sharp ends of his moustache stood out like a rat's whiskers. Delia herself, who was seldom at a loss for something to say, and had indeed spent most of the morning arranging subjects of conversation suitable for such a guest, now found that the power of speech had unaccountably deserted her. Mr. Cartmel, for one thing, was so entirely different from anything she had expected. He was certainly handsome, but there was nothing shaggy about him—

his hair was no longer than that of other people, he was clean, he did not wear a low collar, nor a velveteen coat, nor a flowing tie. He was in everything the opposite of the instructor at the School of Art, from whose appearance her ideas on the subject were mostly derived. Carefully prepared sentiments, based on Ruskin and the magazines, would be altogether out of place under the present circumstances, and she was, for the time, too embarrassed to seek for substitutes. Fortunately Stephen was, for the moment, deep in conversation with her husband—exchanging very ordinary views as to the best route between Chelsea and Tooting—so that she was afforded welcome breathing space.

There came a bumping against the door, followed by the clanking of glass. Mr. Jennings at once desisted from his silent whistling and metaphorically pricked up his ears. After a short delay, the door opened and a servant entered, bearing with some difficulty a large tray. On it was a dazzling silver tea-service—one of the possessions on which Delia most prided herself—three plates of hard biscuits ornamented with pink sugar, a soda-water siphon, and a number of glasses. Close behind the servant came Mrs. Reynolds. Her cap now merged towards the right ear, and she still wore the disreputable little grey shawl. In one hand she carried a bottle of whisky and in the other a second soda-water siphon. "I thought I had better help Annie," she announced triumphantly. "I was so afraid she might break things. And I was afraid there would not be enough whisky for Mr. Jennings, so I sent Ellen out for another bottle. Walker's was shut, so she had to get it at the public-house." She

caught sight of her married daughter's face, and faltered. "I hope I've done right," she added.

Mr. Jennings saved the situation. He laughed loudly and slapped his knee. "Seen me put it away before, haven't you?" he declared, to the company generally. He winked at Stephen, who had risen to assist in clearing a place for the tea-things. "Whisky's a bad thing," went on Mr. Jennings facetiously. "Ought to be put down. Never let a drop pass my lips. Not if I know it." He winked again, to emphasise the point. Stephen smiled dutifully, and taking a cup from Delia, who was seeking comfort in the splendours of her tea-service, offered it to Mrs. Jennings. "It's no good your offering her that," commented her husband, who, having now found his tongue, seemed determined not to lose it again. "She's like me, teetotal, between drinks. No; don't you trouble"—this to Blacklock—"I'll mix it for her. I know how she likes it. Don't I, Meg?"

It happened that Stephen, drawing back to allow of the mixing, came into the line of sight which Mr. Manwell was directing towards Delia's back hair. The young man sighed, rose to his feet, and cleared his throat. "I suppose you are a great reader?" he inquired abruptly.

Stephen realised that he was being tried in the balance. He compromised. "You see, I haven't very much time for it nowadays."

"Then, I suppose you think a great deal."

"Moderately. At least, I hope so."

"But, you don't mind my asking you—where do you get your ideas from? About 'Illicit Love,' for instance?"

"About what?"

"Your sonnet-series, you know. In *Leaves of Myrtle*."

"I'm afraid there must be some mistake. I never wrote a sonnet in my life."

"But aren't you—I thought—the Cartnel? Who wrote *Potential Threnodies*? And who conducts the weekly column on current topics in *Literary Bits*?"

"On my word of honour, I'm not. I am a painter."

Mr. Maxwell's face fell. "Oh. Carrie told me—I must have misunderstood. He has written some poems that——"

His gaze wandered in the direction of Delia, and Stephen realised that he had been found wanting. The way being now clear, he returned, in proper humility, towards the sofa.

Delia had recalled some of her topics. "Did you have any pictures in the Academy this year?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not. I don't send there nowadays, you know. I am what you might call an outsider."

He felt that here, also, he was not giving satisfaction, and welcomed the intervention of Mrs. Reynolds, who having been dozing in an arm-chair beside the fire, awoke to a conversational opportunity. "I remember the first time I ever came to London, going with your father to see the pictures at the Royal Academy. We went to the Tower the same afternoon. And the Waxworks. I remember that we thought the Waxworks were much more life-like than the pictures. We were living in Chapter Street in those days. Just over the bridge." Catching Stephen's eye, she addressed her-

self more particularly to him. "Mr. Reynolds had just been made head-clerk at the Old Bank, so we felt we could afford a holiday for once."

"You used to live in the country in those days?"

"At Barchester, in Gloucestershire," said Delia, hurriedly, dreading the further reminiscences in her mother's eyes.

"There was an artist once took lodging at Mrs. Price's, just opposite where we were living. He was recommended to me first, but I happened to be full. A very good thing, as it turned out. He never paid a penny of rent all the time he was there—nearly two months. But he painted a beautiful picture of Mr. Price in a red waistcoat and——"

Carrie came stealthily behind her mother's chair. "Let me put your cap straight for you. It is all crooked again." Mrs. Reynolds faltered, and, without more words, submitted.

"It is wonderful how little your husband has changed since he was a boy," said Stephen to his hostess. "It was almost like meeting a ghost when I ran up against him in Victoria Street. I had not seen him for nearly five years. I didn't even know he was married."

Here at least was a topic without pitfalls. "Do tell me about your school-life together. John has so often spoken about it."

"We were only together for two years, really. He was a big-boy, just thinking about leaving, when I was a little one, just joining. But he was always ready to fight other people's battles, and when I found him willing to take my part against the school bully I just stuck to him like a little limpet. I remember I used

to think God must look something like him in those days."

Delia glanced at her husband, who was pressing the not over-reluctant Mr. Jennings to more whisky.

"Yet you say he has changed so little," she murmured absently. Stephen caught her eye, but there was no *arrière-pensée* in its limpid depths.

"And how is it that you have seen so little of each other since then?" she went on, rousing herself from her reflections.

"You know how it is. One just drifts apart, almost without knowing it, until one day you wake up to find that you are out of sight. For one thing, I have lived abroad a great deal. I was in France for some years, and afterwards in Italy. And I daresay he's told you I am only just back from a long stay in the East."

"And of course John has been so taken up with his business. But you might have written."

"We did, fairly often. I know whenever I was especially hard up, which was pretty often at one time, he was always the first person I used to write to."

She received the confession with disconcerting gravity. "I can honestly say, too, that for years I never let a month pass without writing to him—in theory. But of course, when it comes to practice, one always puts off writing letters until something turns up worth writing about. And it hardly ever does."

Happening to look round he suddenly became aware that Mr. Manwell was regarding him with a countenance of strong disfavour. He was in the angle formed by the wall and the gramophone-table, his face turned towards where Delia was sitting, with her back to him. It occurred to Stephen that, with a little more charac-

ter, the young man would have made a good model for a Don Quixote meditating an attack upon the wind-mills.

John Blaicklock came towards the fireplace and, taking the poker, knelt upon one knee to stir the glowing coals. As he did so he carefully adjusted the knee of his trouser so that it should not become bagged in the process. Still kneeling he looked round at his wife, to ask her, with affectionate deference, if she thought more coals were needed. The contrasting lights from the lamp and the fireplace cast a genial glow upon his features, accentuating their kindliness.

"You would not think, Mrs. Blaicklock," said Stephen, moved by a sudden remembrance, "that we used to call him 'Tiger' at school, because he had such a temper. Kneeling like that, with the firelight on his face, he looks just as he did when we used to roast chestnuts on the hob in the old schoolroom at Long Monckton. Do you remember?"

"Rather," cried Blaicklock, smiling widely. "Those were some of the happiest days in my life. No, they weren't though," he added seriously, as he looked up at his wife's face. "Not by a very long way. How it does all come back to me!"

He scrambled inelegantly to his feet, stood the poker cautiously in its accustomed position, and dusted his trouser knee, still smiling reflectively.

"I'll tell you something you have forgotten, though, Tiger."

"No. Do you now? What is it?"

"That half-sovereign."

Blaicklock reflected for a moment, then shook his head.

“What half-sovereign was that?”

“I thought of it in the cab coming down. I’ve never paid it back to this day. It was just after he left, Mrs. Blaicklock. I had got into an awful mess with the old lady—Ackroyd was her name, you remember, John—who kept the tuck-shop in the High Street, you know, just past the ‘George.’ She was worrying the life out of me—threatening to tell old Stables—for a couple of shillings or so I owed her for sausage-rolls. I had a perfect passion for sausage-rolls in those times, Mrs. Blaicklock. At last I wrote a despairing appeal to your husband to lend it to me. And he sent me half-a-sovereign back by return.”

Further reminiscences were interrupted by the incidence of Mr. Jennings, whose voice grew louder in exact proportion to the refreshment he consumed. He was replying to Mr. Manwell, who had roused himself from his moodiness, in a tone of marked scorn: “Tom Meredith, you mean, not George. I never heard he wrote things, though I shouldn’t wonder a bit. He’s a marvel, that man. Singing at the Tivoli, last time I was there. What’s that song of his?—‘I caught her out with the lodger.’ How’d it go? I say, Blaicklock, what have you done with those records? Shouldn’t wonder if you’d got that song among them.”

It proved that Mr. Meredith’s masterpiece was not among them, but Mr. Jennings discovered instead Gounod’s “Ave Maria,” which he declared was another of his favourites. No valid objection being offered, the gramophone was re-started, every one listening in decorous silence. When the song was over Mr. Jennings, who had meanwhile kept nodding his head approvingly, as though to encourage the machine

to do its best, drained his tumbler and set it down upon the table before him with a thump, as wishing to emphasise its condition.

"Those cigars of yours look good," he ruminated.

"That's to say the box does." Blacklock, thus reminded of a neglected duty, hastened to offer the cigars round.

"That reminds me," said Mr. Jennings, when he had lit his choice, "of a funny thing that happened to me when I was up in Newcastle. It was before I was married, you see, and there was a pretty little piece of calico——"

Mrs. Reynolds at this juncture rose to her feet, with some difficulty, for her chair was low. "I think I had better see what the girls are about," she said. "It is quite time they were in bed."

For once in a way Delia was grateful for her mother's anxiety to be of use, for Mr. Jennings' stories were apt to be embarrassing. "Do tell me about Japan," she commanded Stephen. "Isn't it all wonderfully artistic—the—the people and things?"

Stephen, with an intuitive understanding of her sudden interest in things Oriental, hastened to obey, while her husband, who had prior experience of such emergencies, drew Mr. Jennings into a corner and patiently endured until the danger-point was passed.

Had his hostess' good looks appealed to him less strongly it is conceivable that Stephen, a young man critical in his appreciations, might have felt a less lively sympathy with her efforts to appear at ease in the face of difficulties. As it was he set himself earnestly to the task of amusing her and interesting her guests. Being accustomed to more sophisticated

audiences he found little difficulty in this; the shadow of distress faded from Delia's face; the rest of the company greeted his efforts with a frank appreciation which, though he made a habit of being a social success, he found not displeasing. Only Mr. Manwell refused to lay aside his gloom, and sat silently apart, gazing moodily at Delia's radiant profile.

But though the success of her evening might seem assured, Delia was not destined to escape further pin-pricks.

"I remember that half-sovereign now," exclaimed her husband, some time later. "It happened while I was living with my old uncle James. Just before he died. It was he who left me the shop, you know." Delia winced. "I had been badly in want of something to do. The poor old dad—that's him, over the mantlepiece—failed in business and died three months later. Of course, there wasn't a farthing. But his elder brother James—he had quarrelled with the dad, and we had seen nothing of him for years—offered me a place in his shop, and kept us all out of the workhouse. It was a queer little place—close to where the extensions of Liverpool Street Station are now. When he died he left everything he had to me—there wasn't much, it's true. I couldn't afford to keep an assistant at first. But I have been very fortunate—very fortunate indeed."

"Which of course you haven't deserved in the least, have you?"

"I am sure I haven't," replied John Blaicklock, simply. "I don't say I haven't done my best, but Fortune has always favoured me much more than I deserved. I have been fortunate in my business, and

fortunate—very fortunate—in my private life.” He smiled lovingly at his wife. “I am a very happy man, Stephen, and it isn’t every one who can say that.”

“There is a German poet, called Skiller,” said Mr. Manwell, suddenly, in tones of the deepest melancholy. “In one of his poems he says that nobody is able to say whether he is happy until he is dead. I think at least that Skiller says so, though I am not sure I am not mixing him up with an English poet.”

“You have a drink, old man,” cried Mr. Jennings; “that’s what you want. Seems to me you need cheering up a bit.”

Stephen realised, for the first time that evening, that no man is altogether without his virtues, and joined gratefully in the general laugh.

“You ought to be a happy man, too, Stephen,” said Blacklock. “I always said you would make a great name in the world.”

Stephen shrugged his shoulders. “My good fortune has been thrust upon me, unfortunately. Things have been made smooth for me, all the way through, by other people. You——”

“How can you say so?” interrupted Delia hotly. “Everybody knows that—what you have done. Why—from the day you showed your first picture—what was it called—the ‘Rape of Polyxena’—you have been painting one great picture after another. And then, when your ‘Harmony in Purple and Green’ was exhibited, with its marvellous intuitions—and all London went wild over it—do you mean to say——”

Stephen was saved the embarrassment of acknowledgment, for Delia was interrupted in the full flood of

her enthusiasm by the hurried entry of the servant, fleeing before a desperate emergency.

"Please, mum—the cabman says he won't wait no longer for his money or he'll know the reason why."

Inwardly showering blessings on the cabman, the culprit rose to his feet. "I had forgotten all about him. I told him to wait. In any case I'm afraid I have stopped an unconscionable time."

"Indeed, you are not going yet. You have only just come."

"It's awfully kind——"

"Let me send the cab away," said Blacklock, "I have scarcely seen you yet. You will easily get another."

"I think I shall do that in any case. He was not an attractive cabman in any way." He drew Blacklock a little aside. "What do you think I ought to give him?"

His host drew a little book from his pocket and consulted it. "If you give him six shillings, including the time he has waited, you will be overpaying him." Stephen was about to give the money to the servant when a diversion occurred. Mr. Jennings, feeling himself neglected, had returned to the gramophone. Choosing one of the records at random he had set it into place—in order, as he subsequently explained, to see how it worked, had presumably wound up the mechanism unconsciously and had as unconsciously started it. At once began the preliminary wheeze, to be followed, in due course, by a music-hall ditty, popular at the time, entitled, "Good-bye, Dolly Grey." There was a certain appropriateness in Mr. Jennings' choice of a tune which tickled the fancy of his audience.

They burst into a general laugh, and waited patiently until the end, while Mr. Jennings, ravished by the melody he had created, held up one hand for attention and solemnly beat time with his cigar. The machine was still declaring, for about the twentieth time, that its heart was breaking, when the servant uttered a scream, which diverted the general attention towards the door. A moment later she was thrust on one side, her place being taken by an angry cabman, stout in body and very red of face.

CHAPTER FIVE

It may have been that the cabman believed himself the object of the general mirth; it may have been that he suspected some covert insult in the discourse of the gramophone; certainly he surveyed the assembly with a deepening frown. Yet he waited until silence had been restored, as though to allow greater weight to his words.

“Look 'ere, guv'nor,” he grumbled, at last. “Not so much of it. S'posin' you pay me my fare. 'Ow much longer think I'm goin' to wite?”

Stephen felt the futility of argument. He produced three half-crowns. “There's your fare. I shan't want you again.”

The cabman gazed at the money with horrified incredulity.

“'Ere—I sye. Wotjer call this?”

“Your fare. And something over. Now—hook it!”

“'Ow long yer been savin' up fur this treat, I should like to know? My fare's fifteen shillin's. An' I don' go for nothin' under.”

He addressed himself to the company generally. “Druv' 'im from Chelsea. 'Arf over London. An' been witin' 'ere over four 'our. Calls 'isself a torff.”

Stephen hesitated, and his hand was already approaching his waistcoat pocket, when Blacklock stepped before him.

“Now, my man. You know as well as I do that you

have no right in here. If you think you are underpaid, you know my address and you have your remedy. But if you aren't outside within two minutes I shall send for a policeman."

"Ho—so thet's it," said the cabman, with great contempt. "I've been drinkin'—'ave I?" He proceeded, with due form and ceremony, to unbutton his overcoat. "I'll fight the 'ole bloomin' lot of yer, for 'arf-a-crahn. 'Ere—'old my coat, some of yer."

"How much longer have we got to endure this?" came in angry tones from the sofa.

Delia had spoken, but the cabman gazed at Mrs. Jennings as being the more easily visible, with strong disapproval. "A nice one you are," he growled, still labouring at his buttons. "Orter be ashimed o' yerself. With 'air like thet. An' at your time o' life, too. 'Ere—I sey——"

For Blaicklock had suddenly, and without warning, leapt at him and seized him by the throat. Though but half his opponent's weight, he was driven onward by the tempest of his sudden fury and the cabman was as a child in his hands. Shaking him as though he had been a rag, he was dragging him through the doorway, when the man slipped and fell, pulling down his aggressor upon him. Even then, so enraged was Blaicklock, that he gripped at the fellow's throat, beat his head upon the floor, and would probably have strangled him outright, had not Jennings and Stephen dragged him off by main force.

"Hold up, man," cried the latter, as Blaicklock struggled to return. "You don't want to kill the chap." To judge by appearances, Stephen was

mistaken. The devil was roused in Blaicklock—his hands were clenched convulsively, his eyes flashed fury, his usual kindly self had disappeared as if by magic.

The cabman, for his part, lay where he had fallen, either insensible or deeming it wiser to appear so. Jennings bent over him and shook him gently. "Time!" he cried, gazing with humorous solemnity at his watch. He, at least, was thoroughly enjoying the adventure. The cabman opened his eyes at the familiar word. "Keep 'im off," he murmured.

Mr. Manwell, in whose eyes the light of battle was blazing, though he made no demonstration, now, at the suggestion of Carrie, brought forward a glass of soda-water, and held it to the cabman's lips. He tasted it, seemed disappointed at the flavour—then, catching sight of Blaicklock, lay hurriedly back upon the floor again. "Don' you let 'im touch me no more," he pleaded anxiously.

"Sure you couldn't do with another round?" asked Jennings, visibly anxious.

The cabman rose clumsily to his feet and picked up his hat, which had been injured in the scuffle. "I've 'ad enough," he announced decidedly. "I don' want no more."

With a scared glance at Blaicklock's purple face, he retreated from the room, escorted to the front door by Mr. Jennings, reluctant to permit such a premature ending to the dispute. Once again the garden gate was heard to click, and the cab drove rapidly away with much jingling of harness, as though the cabman were revenging his defeat upon his horse.

"He ought never to have been allowed to leave the

house alive," exclaimed Mr. Manwell desperately. "If I had had a revolver——" He threw out his hands with a queer gesture of impotent fury, then, as though realising that no one was attending to him, sat down heavily, his face twitching with excitement. Stephen, for his part, as the original cause of all the trouble, endeavoured to make due apology to his hostess. But she disregarded him, gazing with eyes of shining admiration, in which there was yet something of terror, at her husband. The young man, following her gaze, saw that Blacklock was breathing stertorously and that his face was scarlet.

"The brute hasn't hurt you, Blacklock, has he?"

Delia put her arms impulsively round her husband's neck and kissed him on the lips. "You were perfectly splendid, dear," she whispered. For the first time in his life, he ignored her caress, putting her gently aside. "No—no——" he muttered hoarsely, "I'm all right. I'm all right."

"Have a drink, old man," suggested Jennings, now returned to his former station beside the refreshment-tray. He offered Blacklock a glass of his panacea and helped himself to another. "Here's luck!" he exclaimed, as he drank it. "No idea you were such a first-class hand at a scrap. Did one good to see it."

Mrs. Jennings rose statuesquely from her sofa and spoke for the first time that evening, preserving to the full the immobility of her smile. "I think we must be going, Tom." She turned to Delia. "We have had such a delightful evening, dear. Thank you so much."

Blacklock, who had not stirred from where he stood by the door, now turned, so that he faced the assembled

company. He spoke in a curiously smothered voice, under the influence of strong emotion.

"Before anybody goes I want to—to beg all your pardons for what—for the exhibition I just now made of myself. I want——"

"Drop it, man," cried Jennings, regretfully putting down his empty glass. "We all enjoyed it, no end. Only wish it had lasted a bit longer."

"If anybody should apologise it is certainly me," interposed Stephen, sacrificing grammatical accuracy to haste.

Blaicklock waved them, almost angrily, aside. "I never thought that my temper could master me as it has to-night. I want to say——"

The admiration was fast fading from Delia's eyes. "Don't be ridiculous," she said sharply. "There is no need——"

"To say that from to-night, I will never allow any provocation, however great, to make me—as it was to-night. I—I am most deeply ashamed. I—I beg all your pardons."

"Stupid ass," reflected Stephen, watching Delia's expression.

Blaicklock walked slowly towards a chair by the fire and let himself fall upon it, his head hanging. As he passed her, Carrie came to him, and, seizing one of his hands, pressed it impulsively.

"Very well," said Delia, in her hardest voice. "That's settled. Are you sure you won't take some more whisky before you go, Mr. Jennings?"

Mr. Jennings hesitated and glanced apprehensively at his wife, whose back happened to be towards him,

"Just a spot, then," he murmured, suiting the action to the word.

Stephen felt that the appropriate moment for his own farewells had arrived, and came forward for that purpose, but Delia signed to him so imperiously to remain that disobedience was impossible.

Meanwhile Mrs. Jennings had been speaking to her husband in a low voice. He now addressed the company in general. "Nearly forgot the very reason we came this evening—if it hadn't been for Meg. You were saying, last time I saw you"—this more particularly to Delia—"that you wanted to see the Lord Mayor's Show—that so? Well—our new office is right on the route of it this year and Groschen and I are having some friends—there'll be plenty of drinks going—I can promise you some good whisky—and we want you all to come—all friends present. Hope your friend—don't know his name—will come along too. No denials, mind. Wednesday week. You ought to turn up about one."

"I think we must be going, Tom," said his wife. "We have had such a delightful evening. Thank you so much."

She shepherded her husband into the outer hall, smiling generally rather than particularly, and so departed, Mr. Manwell, in obedience to a sign from his fiancée, seeing them off the premises. Stephen would much have liked to follow their example, Blaicklock's attitude being anything but inspiring. But Delia was pitiless.

"Now you must tell me all sorts of things," she said, motioning him to the seat beside her on the sofa.

"Robert"—for Mr. Manwell had now returned,

"pour out something to drink for Mr. Cartmel. Unless you would rather have tea. I'm sure you must want something. And won't you smoke?"

Mr. Manwell, who seemed to have conceived a prejudice against Stephen, looked as if he wished the whisky-bottle contained prussic acid, but obeyed in silence.

"Tell me about your work," commanded Delia. "It must be a wonderful thing—to be able to paint."

His consciousness of Mr. Manwell's eye made any attempt at conversational brilliancy out of the question.

"It's very much like any other sort of work. There's a ghastly lot of humbug talked about it, of course." He realised the sheer impossibility of ignoring Mr. Manwell. "Did I understand that you write?" he asked mendaciously.

"I have never published anything," said the young man, abating a good deal of his malevolence.

"Mr. Manwell writes poetry," explained Delia. It was a simple enough statement, but the tone of her voice was not encouraging to Mr. Manwell's poetic pretensions. The young man ground his teeth deferentially.

"And he cuts little bits out of the papers and pastes them into a book," she went on, obviously bent upon punishing Mr. Manwell for his intrusion into the dialogue.

"Really!" said Stephen, politely interested, "that must be very jolly."

"Have you cut out anything to-day, Robert? I am sure you have got some in your pocket now. Do show them to us. Carrie, you ask him."

Carrie, who was standing beside Blacklock, gazing

into the fire, did not answer, but Mr. Manwell rose, sulkily enough, and produced a letter-case from an inner pocket. He sought among its miscellaneous contents—always as if he were doing so against his will and only in deference to an irresistible power. “Here is one. It is from George Meredith. No—now I come to think of it I am not sure whether it is by him or Wooton Brandram, in ‘Scapegraces.’ It is one of the paragraphs in the ‘Gems from Great Writers’ column in this week’s *Literary Bits*. I cut it out—but I see that I have cut the name off badly, so that it may be either.” He held the clipping close to the light. “It says—yes—‘Poetry is man’s noblest attribute, and that which raises him a little higher than the angels.’” Mr. Manwell was about to close the case, when Delia imperiously interrupted him. It seemed to Stephen that she took a malicious pleasure in making her sister’s fiancée show his paces against his will. “I am sure you have got some more. You never have less than two or three at a time.”

Mr. Manwell seemed about to refuse, but thought better of it. He selected another clipping. “This one—yes—the name isn’t on this either, but I think it is by Bernard Shaw. Or it may be by Miss Creakle—from ‘The Great Infinite.’ ‘Art,’ it says, ‘is the hand-maiden of morality, bearing humanity up the stepping-stones of the ethical cosmos.’”

“It sounds very intellectual,” said Stephen seriously.

“Mr. Manwell has hundreds and hundreds of clippings like that. Haven’t you?”

“Whenever I come across one that seems to express a truth I cut it out and paste it into what I call my ‘Every Day Book.’” Apparently his enthusiasm for

his hobby had overcome his dislike to Cartmel. Or the change might have been due to the winning quality of that gentleman's sympathetic smile. At least, Mr. Manwell now spoke with a certain eagerness that was almost friendly. "I am a very great reader. I don't think I have missed a work by any of our greater writers for the past three years."

"You find them useful commentaries on real life?" queried Stephen, feeling that he was called upon to say something.

"They show us what real life ought to be. They carry us away with them into another world, where——"

He suddenly looked at Delia and faltered, "They widen the mental outlook enormously," he went on, in a soberer key.

"I should think they must," said Stephen, with conviction.

The cuckoo-clock in the hall hiccupped twelve times. Stephen turned to his hostess. "You won't think me very unsocial if I go now? To be quite candid, I have some work I am trying very hard to get finished by the middle of November. And there is so little daylight now that I have to get up rather early so as to miss as little of it as possible."

Disappointment was very becoming to Delia.

"Before I go, though, we must arrange for your first sitting, mustn't we?"

She looked at him with a pretty assumption of perplexity.

"Hasn't John told you? I want to paint your portrait, if you will sit for me."

"Mine? Oh—but I shouldn't—you wouldn't——"

"Just as you are now. On a sofa. And in that dress. It would be stunning. If you don't mind, that is."

"I should like it—very much indeed. I can't say how pleased I shall be to sit for you—whenever you like."

"That's settled, then. Now—when can you come? I'm in Chelsea, you know."

Mrs. Reynolds, having recovered her equanimity, seriously disturbed by the fracas with the cabman, which she had witnessed from the stairhead, was now again ensconced in her chair by the fire. It was long past her usual bed-time and she had dropped off to sleep, her head thrown back, her mouth slightly open, the mauve cap crushed between her neck and the chair-back. Stephen, gazing at her in sympathetic amusement, found himself wondering how soon her handsome daughter would come to resemble her.

"Almost any time would suit me. I have so little to do. It is so very kind of you to ask me."

"Let's see: to-day's Thursday. I wonder if you could give me an hour or so on Saturday morning—about eleven? Perhaps you and your husband could lunch with me afterwards?"

"It would suit me very well indeed."

"Then, good-night. No, please don't disturb your mother."

He made his farewells with his accustomed grace, bestowing a handshake of more than common cordiality upon Mr. Manwell, who, for some reason of his own, again regarded him with marked distrust.

"I hope you will let me look at that scrap-book of yours, some day. I should think it must be quite unique."

Blaicklock aroused himself from his lethargy and accompanied the departing guest to the hall. "I will walk a little way with you and see you into a cab. A little fresh air would do me good."

"I hope the conquering hero comes up to your expectations," said Carrie, when the door was closed.

Delia made a grimace. "Nothing is ever quite what one expects in this world. What did you think of him?"

"I thought he was very affected. And eaten up with conceit."

"Not in the least like an artist," interjected Mr. Manwell.

"Indeed. Well—I suppose you are a judge of such things." She yawned. "I'm going to bed. Mother, wake up; you ought to have been in bed two hours ago." She assisted Mrs. Reynolds to rise and silently adjusted her cap. "When John comes in I expect he will want to work in the dining-room. See that the light is turned out when you come up."

She ignored Mr. Manwell's outstretched hand, and, with only the slightest inclination of her head, sailed past him to the door.

CHAPTER SIX

SIR JAMES shook his white head resignedly. "I daresay it's very clever. I am sure it is, if you say so. But it is no good pretending that I like it, because I don't."

"I am not at all sure that we have found the best place for it," suggested his wife. "It is difficult for it to look its best with all the old family portraits sneering at it as an intruder. I really think, do you know, that it would look better in the alcove in the yellow room."

"Where the light is so bad that the beauty of its colour would be altogether lost." Claire's voice trembled with indignation. "It is the finest painting in the house, and it is only right to put it where it can be seen."

Sir James found the discussion depressing. "You must have your own way, my dear, of course." He gazed despondently up at the new picture. "It does not matter in the least—but I have grown accustomed to having the VanDyck opposite to me during dinner. No doubt I shall get used to this one in time."

Claire felt that she had just cause for indignation. She had intended the elevation of "The Green Kimono" to the place of honour in the dining-room, as a pleasant surprise for her father on his return from Scotland. She had superintended the removal of the Van Dyck portrait of the first Stanmore known to

history to its new position on the opposite wall, and felt convinced in her own mind that the change was for the better. Sir James had paid, without demur, a handsome price for Stephen Cartmel's masterpiece, and it was inconsistent—she was not sure that it was not ungrateful, that he should now grudge it the place of honour in his house. She realised that nothing but his indulgent affection for his only daughter could reconcile him, even outwardly, to the deposition of his Van Dyck; and the knowledge, together with his patient acquiescence, galled her not a little.

Sir James turned away from where they were standing. "I think, if you will excuse me, my dears, I will have coffee brought to me in the library. I have one or two important letters to write." He held the door open, with grave courtesy, for the ladies to pass through.

Lady Stanmore and her step-daughter rustled up the broad staircase without speaking. Claire still suffered from the insult offered to her fiancé's painting; her step-mother was too diplomatic to intrude upon her sense of injury. They passed in silence through the great drawing-room, that always seemed cold and formal save when it was crowded to its fullest capacity, and so into the intimate little boudoir beyond. Lady Stanmore selected the cosiest arm-chair and spread out her skirts before the fire. "We have half-an-hour before we need think of starting," she said, as she settled herself.

Claire knelt upon a chair beside the window, drew back the curtain and gazed out into the night. The outer view was depressing; the window gave upon the front of the house; upon the autumnal square,

with its mournful trees shivering, half-naked, in the drizzling rain, the cold glitter of an arc-lamp accentuating the note of desolation. Claire shivered and let the curtain fall. "A goose is walking over my grave," she declared. "I feel as if—as if something dreadful was going to happen to me."

Her step-mother laughed. "Is it because you missed the Beloved at dinner?"

"I wasn't expecting him. He is to call for us here. He ought to be here by now."

Lady Stanmore gazed at her approvingly. "That gown becomes you exceedingly well. I am very grateful to Stephen for one thing. Your engagement has certainly made you dress better." Claire gazed into the fire with knitted brows and did not trouble to acknowledge the compliment.

"It is most unfortunate that my father should have such a prejudice against Stephen's work. It is beginning to colour their whole intercourse."

Coffee being brought at that moment gave Lady Stanmore the opportunity to consider her reply.

"You can scarcely expect him to like it," she said, as she laid aside her cup. "It is so radically different to everything he has been accustomed to admire. As he says himself, he doesn't know, in most cases, which is top and which bottom of Stephen's pictures."

"Even if he doesn't understand them, he might at least appreciate the genius in them. He is so liberal in most things. Why should he agree to progress in everything else, and expect painting to remain exactly as it was in the Dark Ages?"

"Of course, my dear child, I am not fit to discuss the matter, for I don't know anything more about it

than your father does. But surely I seem to have heard of some painters in what you call the Dark Ages who did nearly as good work as even Stephen."

"It is so different. It is like comparing the driver of a hay-cart to a chauffeur. He may be quite as good a driver in his way, but—— You don't understand—— indeed, you don't."

"I know I don't, dear. But you must admit that the hay-cart is a good deal safer to travel in—even if it doesn't go so fast. And surely you know what it is that really worries your father about Stephen's pictures—and all the rest of the motor-car school? He can't see that there is any hard work in them. They look to him as if they were just dashed in anyhow."

"It is so absurd. There is just as much hard work——"

"Of course there is. I don't doubt it for a minute. But ignorant people, like your father and I, when we see that an artist has devoted hours of patient work to painting—a flower, for instance——she motioned towards an old Dutch flower-painting upon the wall above them——"and has made it look like a flower that we can recognise——well, we can understand that. But when a very young man takes a very wet paint-brush and makes two quick strokes with it on a piece of canvas——so that we can't make head or tail of them——and calls the result a garden of roses——and then you tell us that it is the greatest work of art the world has ever produced——"

"It is easy to ridicule anything, if one looks at it with prejudiced eyes. That is just what I complain of in dear father. He cannot conquer his prejudices. Because he has been used to one kind of painting——"

"My dear Claire—at least you must admit that he has conquered his prejudices to some extent in consenting to your engagement at all. In his time, you must remember, a painter was scarcely the person you would choose for a son-in-law."

"But he likes Stephen personally."

"Certainly. I do myself. He is an extremely likeable young man. Though, while we are on the subject, if I were in your place I think I should hint to him that your father is a man of—shall I say, old-fashioned prejudices?—and that it might be well to humour them a little by assuming a rather more—how shall I put it?—more serious view of life than he does now."

"Oh, but he does, Margaret. He is not a bit the—the butterfly you think him, really. He is tremendously in earnest—he has a great sense of responsibility. If you only knew how splendidly he is working to put his affairs in order, as my father insists they must be before our marriage! You don't know his real character. Nobody knows what he really is—but I."

Stephen, about to enter unannounced, caught the concluding words of her eulogy and noiselessly retreated. When he again entered he fumbled a little at the door-handle, and hummed an old French song about two lovers who kissed each other in a wood.

Lady Stanmore was many years junior to her husband and scarcely older than her step-daughter. The daughter of a bishop who had been suspected of ritualising tendencies, she was a diplomat by inheritance, and had long since lived down the tinge of jealousy which at first coloured her intercourse with Claire. Lady Stanmore realised the advantage of being all things to all men, and particularly to all women;

Claire had inherited her father's serious opinions, and conscientiously endeavoured to model her own behaviour upon them. She feared God, honoured the king, the established authorities, and, most of all, the clergy. She placed reverence first among the virtues and held flippancy for the most deplorable of vices; she would have deplored the extinction of poverty as diminishing the need for charity; she mistrusted the enfranchisement of women, lest it should lessen their habit of self-sacrifice. She was one of those women who realise so fully the happiness of virtue as to be impatient with the folly of those who worship gods of less definite outline. In the Middle Ages she would have been a saint; in actual fact she contributed liberally to the funds of the Englishwomen's Temperance Union, and was a Vice-President of the Association for Improving the Domestic Conditions of the Working Classes. Endowed by nature with a fine physique, regular features, and very luxuriant hair, the comfortable certainty of her convictions had added that expression of calm goodness which goes far to make a plain face beautiful. That she would make an excellent, if rather exacting, wife, there could be no doubt, especially when the primary tints of her enthusiasms should have become toned by the greyer shades of mature experience. That so restless a nature as that of Stephen Cartmel should have found its needed complement in her reposefulness was natural enough; that she should have fallen so deeply in love with him caused her step-mother much secret amusement and some uneasiness, for Lady Stanmore had too much in common with the young man not to realise, instinctively, the mainsprings of his character.

"You are only just in time," said Lady Stanmore, as Stephen made his ostensible entry. "Another five minutes, and we should have started."

"For once I have an excellent excuse. I came in a motor-bus, and it broke down."

"Yet some people deny that the motor-bus has added to the resources of civilisation," commented Lady Stanmore.

He looked at her with frank eyes that hinted at mystification. "Now, what does that mean? Ah—yes—of course. I am only sorry I didn't ask the conductor for a certificate." He turned again to Claire. "Lady Stanmore never believes a word I say. I cannot imagine why. I often do speak the truth."

"I am glad you have come. I should have been anxious otherwise. I was expecting you last night."

"I thought you were going to the Mackintosh's free-fight, or I should have come." He looked down into her upturned eyes. "No, I shouldn't though. I forgot. I was dining with a man—at Tooting, of all places in the world."

"I am going to get ready," cooed Lady Stanmore as she left the room. "I shan't be more than ten minutes. Don't you be late, Claire."

"Have you thought of me once since Tuesday?" he asked her smilingly, after the usual preliminaries.

"I never think of anything, or anybody else, now. You are the whole world to me."

He kissed her again as the most appropriate acknowledgment.

"I sometimes think—fear—that I love you too much. More than I ought to."

"Impossible. You don't love me nearly as much as

68 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

I deserve. And not nearly, nearly, nearly, as much as I love you."

Her eyes shone with a soft light that was almost tearful.

"I know you love me, dear. I feel it, in my own heart. If I ever doubted it, it would kill me. But I never could doubt it. I know you too well for that."

The effort to prevent his errant mind from drawing comparisons between her eyes and those of Delia Blacklock sent a momentary shadow across his face. She was quick to notice it. "What is it? Something has vexed you. Is it anything I have done?"

He rose from his knees and stood before her. "How could it be? No. But I wish—I wish so very much you weren't going away so soon. I want you here—you don't know how much. I always feel as if my good angel had turned his face away from me when I haven't got you."

It was as if a joint had opened in his outer armour, laying bare for a moment the inner depths of his soul. In a moment it had closed again and the careless smile came back to lips and eyes.

"What have you been doing all these years?" she asked a little later.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Working. There's nothing else to be done, when I'm away from you. Keeping my nose as close to the grindstone as it will go!"

"You poor boy. You will be making yourself ill if you do too much."

"Don't be sarcastic. I've got something worth working for now."

"Who was it you were dining with last night?"

"You don't know him. A man called Blacklock. I was at school with him and then lost sight of him for years, until I ran up against him in Victoria Street a week or so since. A very good chap. He's become a hosier, of all things in the world. Got a dozen shops all over London. I wish I had."

"Silly boy! A nice business man you would make. That is one of the things I love in you, Stephen; because I ought not to, I suppose. You are so utterly and entirely unbusinesslike."

"Don't you be too sure. It was a pretty good stroke of business going to Tooting last night. I am going to paint his wife's portrait, and that will probably lead to half a dozen commissions for the rest of the family. My friend Bodman says I shall be appointed painter-in-ordinary to the whole collar-trade before long."

"What is the wife like?"

"Rather a fascinating little person. Don't you feel jealous already? A shade too thin for my taste—you know the sort of yearning type—and with the most delightful Cockney suggestion about her. Used to be his typewriter or something. And now she goes in for wearing Art dresses."

"You poor boy! What a dreadful evening!"

"I don't know. I think I rather enjoyed it. You should have seen the furniture. South Kensington married to Tottenham Court Road and petitioning for a divorce already. We spent most of the time listening to a gramophone, and we ended up the evening with a fight. No; I didn't take part in it. The host and a cabby—my cabby, if you please." He broke off, to resume in another tone of voice. "Claire, does it ever strike you what a mean beast I am? I accept the man's

hospitality, take all he can give me, and then come away and sneer at him."

She gazed at him with tender eyes. "You mustn't find fault with yourself, sir. That is my privilege. Now—I thought you were going to give up taking cabs. I've caught you."

"Not a bit of it. I did my level best to get a 'bus, but I was horribly late and it was raining cats and dogs. You know you have threatened me with all sorts of pains and penalties if I don't look after my health. Besides, if I kept all my good resolutions, you would never have the chance of finding fault with me at all. I am trying to economise, truly I am. That reminds me." He produced a little brown-leather case. "For you. And all my love with it."

"But it is very wrong of you, dearest. I told you you weren't to bring me presents. Oh! how beautiful."

"It's a bypath towards economy. It's a shabby little brute of a thing, really. I wanted to get a much nicer one, but it cost more, so I thought you would rather I economised. You see how obedient I'm getting already."

She laughed happily and fixed the little brooch in the bosom of her dress. "You are quite incorrigible. I suppose I must wait until we are married before I can discipline you properly."

"And the sooner the better, or I shall have ruined myself by my efforts to economise. Is that it?"

"Now, I have a surprise for you, too. You have got to be here at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, without fail. On business."

"What! Has your father——"

"Don't be silly. No. Only Margaret and I are

motoring down to Wintersfield, rain or no rain. And we have promised faithfully to bring you. I can be businesslike, too, Stephen. A little bird whispered to me that Lord Wintersfield wants some one to paint Lady Cicely's portrait—for her wedding."

"Really, Claire Stanmore, I'm ashamed of you. And I always thought you had the artistic temperament. But wait; I'm very much afraid I've got something else. I must remember what it is. Yes—of course; it's Mrs. Blacklock's first sitting."

"You can easily put her off. This is really important. There is another reason. My father is coming down later in the day. He has some business with Lord Wintersfield. So we are all staying over the week-end and I particularly want you to be your very nicest to him. I wish I could have given you longer notice, but I didn't know myself, for certain, until this morning. And remember what I said about my father."

Stephen looked at her inquiringly.

"He likes you very much—you know he does. And admires you. But he knows you so little, really; and when you do see him, you never show him the—the earnest and strong side of your nature—the side you show me, and that has made me love you so dearly. I am so anxious that you should. You see he was brought up in the old-fashioned ways. I love you to be frivolous and talk nonsense, when you are with me; but—he doesn't understand—and I think it makes him anxious."

"He hasn't said anything to you?"

"Of course not, dearest. He is much too loyal. And, as I tell you, he likes and admires you too much.

He knows, too, how much my happiness is bound up in you."

A little shadow grew into his eyes once more.

"I wish I was more worthy of you, Claire. Of course you don't think so. You have built up an ideal figure—and called it me; but I am not worthy to tie your shoe-string, really."

He felt a curious inability to meet her eye and the message of loving trust it bore him.

"I know you better than you know yourself," she told him.

"Then you will come to-morrow?" she asked, after a little. "It won't be interfering with your work too much?"

"Do you think I would miss the chance of going to heaven in a motor-car, for three whole days?"

"There are such beautiful woods at Wintersfield, Stephen. You have never been there, have you? I know a walk through the beeches and up a little hill, where you get a view over the sea, that I am dying to show you. The beech-woods are always most beautiful in the late autumn, when the leaves are falling. We will slip away on Sunday morning together. It won't matter missing church for once. And the service there is so horribly Evangelical."

"I must drop a line to Blaicklock to-night," Stephen was thinking. "Must make up some sort of excuse so that his wife won't be offended. Wonder what's the best thing to say."

Lady Stanmore came back, giving all due warning of her approach, just as he had made up his mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STEPHEN did not return from Hampshire until the following Tuesday. A letter from Delia awaited him, acknowledging his apology and making another appointment for the Monday. Adam informed him, a wide smile creasing his sable countenance, that a lady had called upon the previous day and had seemed disappointed at not seeing him. He wrote at once, detailing the facts and asking if it would be convenient to her to come on Friday. He received no reply, a fact which annoyed him until, changing his coat a day or two later, he found his own letter, still unposted, in one of his pockets.

With the influence of Claire and the beech-wood walk upon him, he worked all the week with unprecedented energy. He did not once set foot across the threshold, allowing himself only the occasional relaxation of a discussion with Bodman, who, for his part, regarded such unusual earnestness of purpose with undisguised alarm as presaging a probable illness. Stephen had intended to write a second and more humble apology to Delia, but, finding it difficult to phrase, put it off from day to day until he should have more leisure.

It was not until the following Wednesday that he reappeared in the outer world. He had a long-standing engagement for that day to lunch with a journalist-friend in the Temple, to celebrate a glorious victory

gained over the Benchers. Those autocrats had recently sought to enforce a rule expelling married subtenants and their families from the precincts, which enforcement the journalist, although a married man and father of one lusty-lunged infant, had successfully evaded. The journalist was, incidentally, an art-critic of a kind, and Claire Stanmore was of the invited guests; for which reasons Stephen felt himself called upon to put in an appearance. He had a subsequent and more intimate engagement to walk for a while with Claire, during which time he might expect to receive her congratulations upon his sustained industry, afterwards accompanying her to Lombard Street, to call for Sir James, who, although he had reached an age when he might reasonably allow himself some repose, was still indefatigable in his duties as chairman of Stanmore's Bank.

Obedient to his newly acquired sense of responsibility, Stephen travelled east upon a motor-bus, compromising with his natural instincts by buying a bundle of crimson roses, as a token of congratulation, for his hostess, and half-a-pound of a favoured variety of French nougat, as a subsequent offering to Claire. He allowed himself an ample margin of time, that he might avoid his besetting sin of unpunctuality, and felt, upon the whole, that he was making a notable stand upon the side of virtue.

He was still twenty minutes to the good at Charing Cross, although the roadway was wet and greasy, and the progress of the 'bus slower and warier than usual. Being inside and intent upon his self-congratulations, he noticed nothing unusual in the appearance of the streets, until the 'bus, having skidded half across the

roadway, as though jibbing at the Gladstone statue, came to a decided stop in front of Saint Clement Danes. Nor could the united efforts of driver, conductor, four policemen, and some two hundred onlookers coax it from its lethargy. Stephen waited, patiently expectant, for five minutes or so, when, seeing no signs of a start, he determined to walk the short distance to Middle Temple Lane. The crab-like position of the motor-bus had caused a severe block in the eastward traffic. As Stephen stepped gingerly down on to the muddy roadway, the restive horse in a hansom behind the 'bus lurched suddenly forward. Stephen leaped back, hearing, as he did so, a startled exclamation from the occupant of the cab. Something familiar in the tones gripped his attention, and, looking up, he recognised Delia Blaicklock. She was looking straight before her, seeming unaware of his presence, unless it were that her cheeks were very red and her eyes shining. Stephen, knowing that she must have seen him, doubted whether this was the outcome of anger or of shyness. In either case it was very becoming.

He thought no more of the mud and its possible effect upon his boots, but made at once for the dashboard.

"Mrs. Blaicklock! Surely you aren't going to cut me?"

"Mr. Cartmel! Then you are coming, too. I am so glad!"

She was obviously sincere, though incomprehensible.

"I was in the 'bus in front," he explained. "This is a piece of luck."

"I am so afraid they will stop the traffic before we

can get through. I do so want to see the Show. I've only seen it once, and that was from the pavement."

Only then it was that Stephen noticed a number of poles, swathed in tawdry scarlet, lining the curb, supporting festoons of faded pennons, their colour waging a losing battle with the prevalent drizzle. They reminded him of Mr. Jennings' invitation, which until then he had entirely forgotten.

"I don't suppose it will be long, now," he answered diplomatically.

"Won't you let me drive you to Fenchurch Street?" she pleaded. "It is a very good horse. Rather too good, in fact. It has the most terrible way of flicking its ears about. I should really be grateful if you would. I am terrified at being in it alone. Oh, mind!"

The much-enduring City police had succeeded in their impossible task of evolving order out of chaos. The impatient cab-horse leaped forward, and Stephen, for the second time, narrowly escaped disaster. Luckily he was able to clutch at the apron and scramble in, with no more damage than the ripping of the paper covering the roses, so that two or three of them fell upon the floor of the cab. Delia caught at his arm and drew him down upon the seat beside her. Her sudden pallor vouched for her alarm, and he felt that it was incumbent upon him to remain with her for at least a few minutes. Fortunately, he had still some time in hand.

"I am not at all sure that I don't owe my life to you."

She smiled rather faintly, and dropped her eyes before his admiring gratitude.

"Don't move your foot," she cried; "you will

crush those roses. How beautiful they are! Crimson roses are quite my favourite flowers. In November, too."

His decision was instantaneous. After all, there was no particular necessity to give Mrs. Baker flowers. Delia was really amazingly pretty.

"That's lucky, because they are for you, if you will accept them. I want them to be ambassadors, to plead my forgiveness for what you must have thought my unpardonable rudeness."

He explained the circumstances of the unposted letter, finding her very ready to forgive.

"John will be delighted to see you. He is to meet me at Mr. Jennings' office. He has been wondering what had become of you. If we ever get there, that is," she added inconsequently.

Stephen glanced up. They were slowly ascending Ludgate Hill, and, even as he looked, Great Paul struck the hour. Now or never was the time for him to make his adieux. But if he admitted that he had not intended to avail himself of Mr. Jennings' hospitality she must realise that he had not originally meant the roses for her.

"I'm afraid I shall have to——" She had buried her face in the crimson fragrance. It set off the pure outline of her cheek to perfection. "We shall be all right," he assured her decisively. The crowded streets would afford a convincing excuse for at least half-an-hour. "Let's see. Is he going the shortest way?"

"John told me to tell the man to go along Cannon Street."

"Yes. Well, he ought to know. What was the number?"

"I don't think there is one. It is a new block of buildings, close to Fenchurch Street Station, he said."

"You don't remember the name? I am always hopelessly at sea in the City."

"John wrote it all out for me. He always does, you know. Whether I am to take the 'bus or the train, and what station I am to go to, and how much I am to pay the cabman, and everything. He is so methodical. Wait. I have it here in my purse."

"Ah, yes. 'Hurstmonceaux House, Fenchurch Street.' Now we shall be quite all right. I knew it was somewhere about that part of the world."

Perhaps there never was a set of offices so clamantly new as were those of Messrs. Jennings and Groschen. They were in a brand-new building, just set up at the corner of a brand-new street driven across the site of some old-time dock-warehouses. They were on the third floor, and were approached by a brand-new lift, worked by a small boy in a uniform which quite scintillated with newness. A very large brass plate, that might have been set in position within the last twenty-four hours, ornamented the firm's front door, and, as soon as you passed it, your nose was assailed by the concentrated essence of the very newest of new paint and varnish.

Entering, you came into an outer office, in which was a long counter of highly polished veneer in imitation of mahogany. Beneath the windows facing the counter was a long, high desk, giving accommodation for six clerks, though the present staff consisted of one, newly engaged, and an office-boy. The salient feature of the room was a very large safe, painted a spring-green colour, with very twinkling brass handles.

This office was surrounded by glass partitions, in which were three doors resplendent in the newest of white paint. One of them bore the inscription, "Private"—leading to the room reserved for the partners. Upon the second were the words "Sample Room"; the third was anonymous, leading, as a matter of fact, also into the sample room. The new clerk ushered Delia and Stephen through the door marked "Private," and almost into the shirt-sleeved arms of Mr. Jennings, who was drawing the corks from a number of bottles. Though taken by surprise, he was by no means disconcerted, welcoming his guests with hilarious hospitality. The rest of the company, he explained, were in the sample room with Mr. Groschen, but he pleaded that the newcomers should lighten his labours with their company. They sat down, accordingly, in two very new arm-chairs and waited while he drew corks with a deftness which spoke of long practice, setting out the bottles in a row on the flat tops of the two new American desks which stood, back to back, in the centre of the room. When he had finished, and Stephen had refused his offer of a preliminary "spot," Mr. Jennings resumed his very new coat, which was of brown tweed, with a design of large red checks, adjusted the suspiciously large diamond which sparkled in his new necktie, and led the way into the sample room.

Mr. Groschen was a little man and stout, with very high cheek-bones, very small eyes, very sleek black hair—smelling strongly of pomatum—and a moustache which turned imperially skywards. In the buttonhole of his very short-tailed frock coat he wore a large red dahlia. It was apparent that he was but

newly arrived in England, for he was still habited in clothes of aggressively German fashioning: a white tie, a waistcoat cut so low as to give him the suggestion of a waiter, cashmere trousers, ill-suited to the prevalent weather, and boots with elastic sides. He wrung Stephen's hand in both of his as though greeting a long-lost brother, and, when presented to Delia, assumed a smile of Teutonic fascination which gave him something of the aspect of a large tom-cat. After which he sidled smilingly into a corner, to resume his interrupted duty of pressing sparkling hock upon anybody whose glass was less than three-quarters full.

The firm of Jennings and Groschen had determined to celebrate the Civic feast regardless of expense. Not only had they provided eatables sufficient to provision a small garrison and potables sufficient to prostrate a large one; the whole of their frontage upon Fenchurch Street, four large windows in all, was devoted to a timber scaffolding, on the model of a racecourse grandstand, providing seats for at least a hundred guests, instead of the twenty or so actually present. Into the shadow of this Stephen and Delia made haste to retire, finding the insistent hospitality of their hosts rather overpowering. They were at once greeted by Carrie, who had preceded her sister and was escorted by Mr. Manwell. That gentleman, with a foresight which did credit to his business acumen, had secured a plate of sandwiches and was earnestly eating his way through it, with some slight assistance from his betrothed. Both, being total abstainers, were washing down the feast with undiluted soda-water. Whether from this or some other cause, their faces were expressive of passive endurance, rather than of gaiety. In Mr. Man-

well's case, it changed to scarcely concealed hostility upon Stephen's advent with Delia. She, for her part, had the curious effect of instantaneously taking away his appetite; so that, having shifted his position slightly in order to obtain an uninterrupted view of her profile, he thus remained, with a half-demolished sandwich unnoticed in his hand.

In the sample room Delia showed a reserve, almost amounting to shyness, to which she had been a stranger in the hansom. She answered Stephen's observations with timid monosyllables and an embarrassed smile, and showed a fixed resolution to include her sister in the conversation, which he found entirely unnecessary. Driven back, little by little, upon his own resources, he sought amusement in the remarks of the other guests, which, however, being for the most part couched in terms of business, were more or less unintelligible to him. The room was rapidly filling, most of the guests being men, the majority of them of the clerk or commercial-traveller class, from which fact Stephen diagnosed that Mr. Jennings' business was not of any very high standing in the trade. Mr. Groschen's persistent circulation with the sparkling hock bottle made little eddies and currents in the company, so that its constituents were constantly shifting, with the exception of those who, like Stephen and his party, had securely anchored themselves in corners. Thus it happened that two stout gentlemen, each with a little roll of scarlet flesh jutting out above his collar, were forced backwards almost upon Stephen's feet. Each held a newly replenished tumbler, and they were exchanging confidences in whispers louder than might otherwise have been the case.

"'Ow long is it going to last?" ruminated one.

"I'll give them six months—at the outside," said the other.

"Shouldn't wonder if that's just about what our friend does get in the end," said the first, chuckling greasily.

"May last until the new crop comes in." He took a long pull at his tumbler, popped a sandwich into his mouth and continued to moralise as he ate. "Our friend J. is talking about cornering the market now. He won't be the first that's tried that game."

"'E's only talking through 'is 'at. *Ought* to 'ave 'is 'ead screwed on the right way. 'E was the best salesman Murgatroyds ever 'ad."

"Case of put a beggar on horseback. You take it from me."

"But 'ow about the German Johnny? Can't be going into it with 'is eyes shut?"

The pessimist swallowed a piece of French pastry and helped himself to a sandwich from the sample-bin beside him. "Heard about his offer to Prescotts? Parry, their town-traveller, told me. Came along from nowhere and said he wanted a job as volunteer. You know how down the old man is on these cheap Germans. He saw our friend and told him to clear out. That put G.'s back up, and he told him if they didn't want a clerk, p'raps they could do with a partner. Said he might find as much as a couple of thousand, if they could do with all that at one time." His chuckle became apopleptic and had to be placated with the tumbler. "And wouldn't want more than a third share for it, either. Parry says the old man nearly had a fit. So now he's going to show Prescotts

and all the other big houses how they ought to manage their businesses. In the time he can spare from his tarts and bookies."

"'Ow'd Jennings pick 'im up?"

"Rather think it was old Jimmy Bates. You know him—used to be on the road for Baycliffes, the whisky people. Wonder what J. gave him for it."

"Well, I shall be sorry if J. does burn 'is fingers. 'Ad some good times on the road together, 'im and me. I remember one night at the old King's 'Ead, in Sheffield. Lord! that was a time. 'E's nobody's enemy but 'is own, isn't Tom."

"Only got two faults, and either's enough to hang him. Opens his mouth too wide and turns his little finger up too often."

"Psst!" hissed the optimist.

Jennings came towards them, joyously signalling with a bottle. They beamed affectionate acceptance, and with the exclamation, "Here's to us!" drank to his health and prosperity.

Blaicklock did not arrive until just before the procession was expected. The assembled revellers, who had spent the time not occupied by refreshments in staring at each other mistrustfully, had already taken up their positions on the grand-stand, but there was no lack of space, and he was able to find a seat next to Delia. He greeted Stephen with pleased surprise, and smiled gratefully at the bundle of red roses.

"What's become of mother?" he inquired, quartering the benches in search of her.

"Her cold seemed worse this morning, and, as it was such a bad day, she thought she had better not come."

“I’m sorry for that. She was so looking forward to it. Don’t you think she would have been all right in a four-wheeler? I promised to take her to Paternoster Row on the way back, to get a copy of Chadband’s book attacking the Pope, that she is so interested in. But it will do another time.”

The blare of distant trumpets drew all eyes to the street. The policemen lining the pavements shouldered back the crowd, a certain tremulousness became apparent among the umbrellas which glittered above it, and the guests upon the hinder benches of the grandstand craned their heads forward.

The music drew nearer, a mounted policeman trotted by, and so, at last, the familiar procession lurched into sight. There were countless bands, all, according to precedent, playing different tunes, with stupendous effect. Where there were no bands, there were soldiers, marching as cheerfully and steadfastly as the slippery mud would permit. Commissionaires, in gala caps resplendent with cock’s feathers, filled any gaps in the line, bearing heraldic banners with creditable dignity. There were healthy beadles, some walking, others seated upon the box-seats of carriages, but all alike rosetted and be-ribboned and wearing their accustomed honours with an easy grace. There were sleek cart-horses, decorated like the beadles, and dragging heavy “emblematic” cars—which were really railway lorries in disguise—as though they liked it. Thus, taking pride of place, as though out of compliment to Father Adam, was one which shadowed forth the gardening industry. It might have carried more conviction had an industrious gardener been shown at work, but the garden, tenantless though it were, was so trim, so real-

istic in its rockeries, so luxuriant in its flowers, and rolled so smoothly upon its hidden wheels, that not all the suburbs taken together, from Surbiton to Shepherd's Bush, could have produced its like. It was followed by the Dawn of Printing, vouched for by a printer and his "devil," clad in bright colours and of a clean and satisfied aspect which defied the weather and said volumes for the early days of the profession. There were three cars emblematic of the Rise of the British navy, each showing a noble vessel riding its car like a thing of life, and vividly suggesting the poet's lines about a painted ship upon a painted ocean. They had no crews aboard; the sailors, clad in appropriate costumes mildly piratical in tendency, serving for the nonce on land and guiding the horses. There was a car which typified the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, just then upon the tapis—two females, appropriately garbed, standing side by side and hand in hand upon a pinnacle, defying alike the weather and the world. It occurred to Stephen as being a bad omen that their position should look so insecure, and that at each lurch of the wheels below them they should quiver until their sodden garments rustled. And always, as each of these testimonies to the majesty of an Imperial City passed on its way, came more bands and more soldiers—Volunteers for the most part, but very martial—and more commissionaires, and more beadles, and sleek gentlemen in black and scarlet robes, and sleeker gentlemen in cocked hats and importance that hung around them closer than their garments, and, last of all, the new Lord Mayor himself, in his gilt coach, with its wide-stockinged coachman, ponderously indifferent to the lower world—following,

86 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

as did Amurath upon Amurath, his deposed predecessor.

Mr. Groschen, who, during the passage of the procession had made a laborious pretence of going to sleep, now pretended to awake with a start. "So," he remarked, with elaborate contempt, "zat is vot you call ze Lordmareschau."

He addressed himself more particularly to Stephen, who was sitting just below him, and who, though he would have resented any accusation of patriotism, felt his gorge rise at this assumption of Teutonic superiority.

"Ant it is for such tschildishness zat you shdop all ze draffic of ze City. No vonder zat Chermany can take away your pizness."

"But at least there were plenty of soldiers, Mr. Groschen," protested a lady unknown. "Surely you liked them. I thought all Germans——"

"Soltchers! you call zem soltchers! Pfui! You do not know how a soltcher looks in Englant. If your English army see a real soltcher coming, it tchust run away altogezzer."

He swelled with amiable superiority and twirled his moustache imperially. Then, as not desiring to be too hard upon his inferiors, he added, "It is all right to fight savitches—black men. But, even ze Boares could zhrash you."

"Oh, cut it short!" exclaimed an irritable gentleman in the back row.

"It is true. I read it in your own newspapers."

The irritable gentleman snorted, but another and stouter champion arose among the ladies.

"It's all very well to talk," she announced, ad-

dressing herself to a house on the opposite side of the road, trembling the while until the jet ornaments upon her bonnet rattled; "but my boy James is in the Volunteers, though I say it. And all I know is that if Kayser William thinks he can beat the Third London Rifles—not with all his army—let him come and try—that's all. We'd soon see." She sniffed contemptuously and sat very upright upon the bench. Mr. Groschen turned towards her with his most ingratiating smile.

"But vy shoot ve fight? zere is nozzing vy ve shoot kvarrel. All zese misonderschtandings—zey are nozzing." He waved a large and rather dirty hand to emphasise his remarks. "It only vants zat ze English shoot underschtand zat zey no more leat ze world—zat Chermany is aheat of zem. Zen ve schall be all goot vriendts togezzer."

At this point Stephen noticed that Mr. Manwell was clenching and unclenching his hands with great rapidity, and glowering at the unconscious Mr. Groschen as though meditating his death by violence. He speculated pleasantly upon the possibilities of a riot, but just then Mr. Jennings reached his partner's side, and whispered to him. Mr. Groschen nodded vigorously. "So. Laties and schentlemen, schall ve have some more trinks? How is it?"

Stephen looked at his watch. It was close upon the hour when he had promised to call with Claire at her father's bank. "I must be going." It pleased him to fancy that Delia looked disappointed. "I have an appointment. In Lombard Street. And as I haven't the vaguest idea where I am——"

"Lombard Street? Oh, Mr. Manwell is going there.

That is where his office is. I am sure he would be glad to show you the way."

However it might be with her eyes, there was no malice in her voice. Mr. Manwell looked helplessly at Carrie, but rose and said, in a voice which contradicted him, that he should be very pleased.

"Before I go," went on Stephen, "we must arrange about that sitting. I am almost ashamed to ask you, but how would to-morrow—at eleven? suit you—And you and your husband must lunch with me afterwards."

This arranged, Stephen, followed by the unwilling Mr. Manwell, wormed his way through the crowd, escaping the farewells of Mr. Jennings and his partner, by now grown mildly uproarious. "I only wish," said Mr. Manwell, as they waited for the lift, "that duelling was still allowed in this country. I—I could have killed that man."

In his hatred of Mr. Groschen, he became almost reconciled to Stephen, and confided to him that he had overstayed his time and would probably suffer for it when he reached his office. "I shall have to put it down to the crowded streets, I'm afraid."

"Won't you come under my umbrella," suggested Stephen, sympathising with the well-worn silk hat. Mr. Manwell seemed to hesitate, as though fearful of compromising with the evil one, but finally consented. "Which end of Lombard Street do you want?" he asked when they came to the crossing of Grace church Street.

"About half-way down. Stanmore's Bank, if you know it."

“Really; I’m in the teller’s department there. You haven’t an account with us, have you?”

Stephen, especially at times when his own bank hinted to him that his account was not a profitable one, had frequently congratulated himself that he had not.

“No, I am not going there on business.” This sounded needlessly mysterious. “I am calling to fetch Sir James Stanmore. He leaves about four, doesn’t he?”

The information seemed to oppress Mr. Manwell, who said no more until the bank was reached, Stephen meanwhile thinking out a convincing excuse for his absence from the Temple. It was with a certain sense of guilt that he passed through the great swing-doors.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PUNCTUALLY at eleven o'clock Delia stood upon the threshold of the studio. She was wearing her most becoming hat and the new sable coat which her husband had bought for her in honour of the occasion. The day was unusually warm, for which reason, and that she might not crush the crimson roses at her girdle, she wore the coat open. Her heart beat quickly and her cheeks glowed. It was her first visit to a real painter in a real studio, and the anticipation was exciting. Of course there were limitations to her happiness. It was unfortunately possible that Mr. Cartmel might not consider her personally interesting; might only be painting her portrait, as he asserted, out of his friendship for John. She was not certain, either, whether she ought to have come without a chaperone. She did not know what was the usual custom in such matters. But Carrie had her daily work and Mrs. Reynolds was—— Altogether Delia had preferred to risk it and come alone.

Stephen himself opened the door—looking his best, as was perhaps natural after the exceptional time he had spent over his toilet. It pleased her much to believe that the warmth of his greeting had nothing second-hand about it. It pleased her still more to notice, as he led the way through the outer studio, that a great bunch of crimson roses stood on the table. Of course, it might be only a coincidence.

The working studio was as bare as its fellow was comfortable. There were three easels, one bearing an unfinished canvas; there were other canvases stacked against the walls; there was a mysterious figure, masked in dusty draperies, lurking guiltily in a corner; there was a general, all-pervading smell of turpentine; there was a chesterfield upon a low daïs at the further end of the room, and close beside it a glittering new canvas upon an easel. Stephen bade her sit down, and went himself to rummage in an obscure corner where was a huge portfolio on a stand beside two packing-cases. She sat stiffly upright, feeling unexpectedly confused and shy, not knowing what was expected of her; rather afraid of a mysterious reclining figure, which might have been a dead child, supported by a rough wooden pedestal and covered over with a wet sheet. Stephen was now adjusting a number of cords made fast to pegs in the wall, drawing and re-drawing screens of semi-transparent canvas across the upper skylight, looking frequently across to where she sat the while. The discovery of a little hole in the fingertip of her glove worried her unduly.

"Don't you want me to sit in any particular position?" she asked, when he had finished. She was keeping her chin raised and her muscles taut, with an intense expression, as she was wont to do when being photographed.

"I only want you to make yourself comfortable," he smiled back.

"Would you like me to take my hat off, and my coat?"

"If you would rather. This place is rather draughty, though."

His tone was almost off-hand; he had brought with him a large piece of grey paper and was doing something with it upon a pedestal table, honeycombed with drawers and with a top which opened on hinges, but the big canvas hid all but his legs. She felt a little annoyed with him and said no more.

"Now, please; you have got to tell me things—amusing things," he commanded, appearing round the edge of the canvas.

"To tell you things! Oh, but I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I haven't got anything to tell you. I am not a good talker."

"That's bad."

He went into eclipse again and she could hear him opening and shutting drawers in the table. His manner was business-like, almost abrupt, she thought, and by no means approved of the change.

"You got back comfortably yesterday afternoon?"

"Quite, thank you. We got a car from London Bridge. Did you find the place you wanted?"

"Mr. Manwell was an excellent guide. It turned out that he is employed in the very office I was going to. He is engaged to your sister, isn't he?"

"They have been for six months. But I don't know when they are likely to get married. You see—he spends all his money on books."

"It seems a fairly moral way of speculating, doesn't it?"

"I don't mean useful books—that would do him any good—but novels and poetry and things like that. I am really sometimes almost afraid it is affecting his— but I oughtn't to say that. He takes them so

seriously. There are two especially—one who writes detective stories and another, a man called, what is it? Shaw—Bernard Shaw, I think. Do you know the name?”

“I think I have heard it somewhere. He’s a humorist, isn’t he?”

“I don’t know. Robert lent me one of the things he’d written and it seemed to me mere nonsense. But Robert takes him quite seriously, and calls him the greatest writer that ever lived. And since he has begun to read so much, he says and does the strangest things. It has affected his whole life.”

“But what does your sister say to it?”

“She doesn’t seem to mind. He talks the most dreadful nonsense sometimes. He told Carrie only yesterday—but I oughtn’t to tell you.”

“I wish you would.”

“Well, he said to be a good artist you had to be an immoral man. And that—what was it? yes—that Art was a beautiful flower that was rooted in corruption.”

“Did he get that out of Mr. Shaw, or the detective stories?”

“I don’t know. I expect it was from one of those clippings he cuts out of the papers, like he showed you. Wasn’t it absurd?”

“Well, it’s true enough, in one sense.”

“Mr. Cartmel! Surely, you don’t mean that?”

“After all, you know, a country is never any good artistically until it’s going to the dogs. A lot of silly people spend their time groaning because England isn’t an artistic country, and trying to get everybody made artistic by Act of Parliament. But it’s an un-

commonly good thing for England that we're not artistic. And for Art, too."

"I wish I was cleverer. I don't understand at all what you mean.

"Don't be so severe, please. Only that Art is like Religion. As long as you do your best to stamp it out of existence, it flourishes in spite of you, like weeds in a garden. But if you try to cultivate it and it becomes a popular success, it goes to the dogs at once. When a painter was looked upon as a vagabond and you always counted the spoons as soon as he had left your house, it meant that no one was going to choose painting for a profession unless he had it in him and it just had to come out. But nowadays, when it has become one of the respectable professions, every kind of ass crowds into it on the chance of ending up with a peerage. So, of course, the average level is bound to go down."

"But what are you to do, then?"

"Pass an Act of Parliament making it a punishable offence to paint pictures at all, and clap your painter in gaol whenever you can catch him. There would be some splendid stuff turned out then. But when you've got South Kensington and municipal Schools of Art all over the country, working day and night as so many mills to turn out mediocrities, what can you expect?"

"But I thought you said it was the ruin of a country to be artistic?"

"I ought to have said to want to be. It's only when a nation is on the down-grade in other things that it begins to think of Art with a large A. When you are busy building up your empire, or your commerce, or

the things that really matter, you haven't got time to worry about the best way of daubing colour on bits of canvas, or making your factory-chimney look like Italian campaniles. It's always been so. Rome became artistic just when she was going to pot; the most artistic period in Italy was when the whole country was in a state of anarchy; the greatest artistic period in France was just before the Revolution. Now that England is getting old and a bit sleepy, she is just beginning to think about getting artistic and making London beautiful. America is on the up-grade—and a more abominably inartistic place or people you can't imagine. Germany, too. Look at the representative Teuton we saw in the City yesterday. Can you imagine his having been bred in any country that had the remotest conception of the meaning of the word Art? They would have strangled him at birth. And Germany is the most go-ahead country in Europe."

"But what about the Japanese? They are artistic, aren't they? I've always thought——"

"That's different. It isn't art at all, in the artistic sense of the word, with them. It's nature. They just make things beautiful—artistic, if you like—in the ordinary way of business. Or did—until we came along and ruined them. That was how, all the really great artists that ever lived did their work. They never gassed about their Art—they scarcely knew what the word meant—they just did their jobs as well as they knew how to do them. But, by George, when you get a country like this, that goes in for raising a sort of caste of long-haired, long-eared geniuses that go about proclaiming themselves a special brand of humanity, and getting the ha'penny papers to say it

for them—I tell you, it makes me ill to meet some of them.”

“But, Mr. Cartmel, you are an artist yourself.”

“And it’s an ill bird that fouls its own nest. Quite true. But, then, I never practise what I preach, I only think it. I gas and posture and bray like all the rest of the herd, and kick myself for it when I wake up at four o’clock in the morning and think about it. What would you have?” He shrugged his shoulders. “*A la guerre comme à la guerre.*”

“You shouldn’t run yourself down like that; it isn’t right. I don’t believe for a moment that you are like that. I am sure——”

She broke off abruptly, embarrassed at her own warmth.

“The whole trouble with me, Mrs. Blacklock, is that I have the artistic temperament.” He laughed. “But I’ve been boring you in the most shameful way. I always ride my hobby-horse to death when I mount him at all. Do forgive me.”

If she was bored, she concealed it admirably. She was leaning forward, her lips parted, her smooth forehead puckered with anxiety to follow his meaning, her dark eyes fixed upon him, with no self-consciousness to mar their brilliancy. “If only she would keep like that,” he thought, making rapid memoranda. He cast about for other subjects likely to hold her interest.

“Tell me about your husband. He is coming to lunch, by the way, isn’t he?”

The light faded slowly from her face as though the dusk were falling. “He said he would, if he could possibly get here in time.”

"That's good. Do you know, I think he is about the best chap I ever knew."

"Do you? It is very kind. I am very glad you do."

"I can't tell you half the good turns he has done me in his time. And others also."

"Yes. John is a very good man. I sometimes think he must be one of the best men in the world." She spoke more thoughtfully than was usual with her. "I—I owe everything to him. So do my mother and Carrie. I can never be grateful enough to him for all he has done for poor mother. You know—I expect he told you that I—that I was in his employ. I was a typist when he married me. We—we were very poor after my father died, and Carrie and I had to go out to work for our living." She spoke with something of an effort, as though she were making a confession. "That is why I am so dreadfully ignorant. I had to leave school, even before Daddy died. He had a long illness. Oh, Mr. Cartmel, I wish I knew more about things—about painting—and—and—books—and things that really matter."

Stephen's sympathetic manner gained him many feminine confidences.

"It is dreadful to me not to know anything—not to know if a picture or a book is good or bad, or what makes it so. I have never known anything. Or seen anything. Or done anything. All my life."

"Don't you go out much?" he asked, in conversational tones, seeking to lift her thoughts out of their melancholy groove.

"I never go anywhere. John is always so busy—so taken up with his work. He is always tired when he does get home. And there is no one else I can go

with. He promised to take me to Italy last spring. But when the time came, he couldn't leave the business."

"After all—'East or west—home's best.'"

"Yes; if you have something to compare it with. You have been able to prove it for yourself. You have been everywhere and seen everything."

"You get tired of knocking about, after a bit, just as you do of stopping at home. There have been times when I have nearly cried to be back in London again. I remember the first time I was in Italy. I was very young at the time—not much more than a boy—and I was in Naples by myself for a week. I used to walk about the streets, longing to be home again. One day I passed a chemist's shop and happened to look in the window. There was a little statuette of an old woman washing a boy's face. You've seen it hundreds of times and never thought twice about it. But that time it just brought the tears into my eyes. I went in and bought a packet of the soap—they charged an infamous price for it, I remember—and for the next quarter of an hour I was back in England again. I sat on one of the benches in a little square, and just read the English words on the wrappers over and over again, until I knew them by heart. Many and many a time since then, when I've been in a foreign town and felt lonely, I've walked down one of the streets looking for an English advertisement, and when I've found it, it has been like shaking hands with an old friend."

"Do tell me about some of the countries you've been to."

Stephen had inherited a flexible voice and the trick of descriptive speech from his Huguenot ancestors.

It was essential that in some way he must bring back the light into her eyes again, for it was thus that he had determined to paint her. He set himself seriously to the task of amusing her—detailed his travels in the uttermost parts of the earth; painted little word-pictures of Italy and America and the East; recalled, with such improvements as occurred to him, adventures which had, or ought to have, overtaken himself or his acquaintances. He had, as all good talkers must have, the power of gauging to a nicety the effect of his words upon his listener's emotions, playing upon them as upon an instrument, striking chords of thought and harmonies of imagination as does an organist improvising upon a theme—and with as keen a pleasure. He found in Delia an ideal listener—quick in understanding, keen to take up a point, responsive to his words as the most delicate instrument. He soon acknowledged, in his heart, that she was not the pretty fool he had been inclined to think her—a good listener is never foolish in the eyes of him who speaks. His efforts gained their end; in a little Delia had fallen into her former attitude; her face again took on its rapt attentiveness; her eyes shone as brightly as he could desire; his fingers could work almost as nimbly and with as gratifying result as did his tongue.

He was recounting an adventurous voyage in a felucca manned by a crew of Greek fishermen among the islands of the Archipelago, when there came a tapping at the door. Remaining unacknowledged, it was repeated, and the face of Bodman was deprecatingly intruded. He coughed apologetically. "I beg your pardon, Cartmel, for disturbing you. There is a gentleman inquiring for you. He couldn't make any

603974 A

one hear—Adam must have gone out—and came to my door.”

The charm was broken—the veil dropped over Delia’s eyes again. Cartmel himself started at the interruption. “It must be your husband, Mrs. Blacklock. How awfully rude he will think me! Where have you left him, Bodman?”

“There is nothing to be seen yet,” he explained, as Delia came down from her throne. “Won’t be for perhaps half a dozen sittings.” He wheeled back the easel, with its face to the wall, and followed Bodman from the room.

Delia was in her most amiable mood when he returned with Blacklock, and even allowed her husband to stand for some minutes with his arm round her waist, while he pleaded to be shown the morning’s work. But the painter was inexorable, and deftly shepherded his guests into the other room with their curiosity unsatisfied.

Luncheon had been prepared by unseen hands. “I’m sorry to say we shall have to do our own waiting. It so happens that it is my man’s day for getting drunk.” They looked at him in some surprise. “You see, he’s rather a curiosity. He is black for one thing. I picked him up down at the docks when I was doing some sketches there once. He is a thorough Cockney in everything but skin—I won’t say colour. He was born in Whitechapel. His father had something to do with a menagerie, and he used to make his living, from the time he was a small boy, at what they call sand-dancing—music-hall entertainment of some sort. But he had an accident—broke an ankle, I think it was—so that he couldn’t dance any more, and when

I picked him up he was starved to a skeleton. He makes an excellent servant, but from the very beginning he has always stipulated that I allow him to be drunk for one day in every week. This happens to be the day, unfortunately. But he lays the table before he gets quite incapable, so I hope we shall be able to manage. You must make allowances for deficiencies."

"Sitting seems to have given you an appetite," said Blaicklock, later, regarding his wife's empty plate with his usual kindly smile. "You haven't told me how you liked it yet."

"I'm afraid Mrs. Blaicklock must have found it a tedious business, only she is too polite to say so. It always is, especially the first sittings, before the painter knows what he's after."

"It's surprising to me that you should have the energy to paint at all, after yesterday. I expected to find you prostrated with the remembrance of our civic splendour."

"More likely to have found me prostrated after the splendour of Mr. Jennings' hospitality." He smiled retrospectively. "He ought to make a popular alderman, some day."

Blaicklock shook his head doubtfully. "Jennings is an excellent fellow at heart. But that sort of thing is a mistake."

"His methods of hospitality, do you mean?"

"Not so much that." He crumbled his bread into pellets and set them out in a neat row beside his plate. "I'm not a teetotaller myself, but whisky is better kept outside an office. Jennings looked in on me this morning, and he was saying that he always keeps a bottle in his desk, ready for anybody who comes in."

He says it brings buyers along who wouldn't come otherwise." He shook his head.

"They seem prosperous enough, to judge from appearances."

"Mr. Groschen has a certain amount of capital, no doubt. But whether they are justified in taking such an expensive office—— Jennings has just moved into a larger house, too."

Delia had been trying to catch her husband's eye, as a hint to him to change the subject; he was gazing thoughtfully into his plate and did not notice her.

"John has Mr. Jennings on the brain," she said at last. "He never talks about anything else nowadays."

He smiled apologetically. "He gave me a call this morning, that's why I am so full of him. They must be doing a splendid business, according to his own account."

"John always chooses his friends like that," explained his wife. "Not for what he likes, but for what he disapproves in them. Mr. Jennings is just the sort of man that he naturally dislikes, but because he drinks too much whisky, and boasts such a lot, and spends too much money, John positively loves him, and spends hours giving him good advice that he doesn't take."

Stephen smiled. "I hope he doesn't choose all his friends on that principle."

"He does, really." She became confused, hesitated, but found a way out. "He even chose his wife in the same way, didn't you?"

"As long as it has brought me such a wife and such friends——" He gave a queer little courtly bow to

each of them; "I don't think it can be such a bad principle, after all. If only it was true, that is to say."

He looked at his watch. "I'm very sorry, little woman, but I shall have to go now. I have to see a traveller from Nottingham at three, and it will take a good half-hour to get back to Cheapside. I know you will excuse us, Stephen. It is just my busiest time, now."

Delia's momentary hesitancy perhaps existed only in Stephen's imagination. "We can go together as far as Victoria, if you like. I can take the train to Balham from there. How soon do you want me again, Mr. Cartmel?"

Stephen had been working at his painting of "The Marble Faun"—destined to prove the chief attraction at the International—for perhaps half-an-hour, when he was startled by a heavy thud, shaking the skylight, coming from the direction of Bodman's studio, which adjoined his own. Fearing some accident, he ran out into the passage-way and entered without knocking. He found his friend, physically at least unharmed, standing before a huge, unfinished canvas, cursing all his gods with surprising volubility. Upon the floor beside him lay a costermonger's barrow, prone upon its side, its upturned wheel still slowly revolving. The floor was littered over with turnips, cauliflowers, tomatoes, and other vegetables, evidently fallen from the barrow at its overthrow. Their presence was explained by the subject of the picture—a Saturday night street-market, its central point a coster's vegetable-stall, with several purchasers of the poorer class before it. It was

not a beautiful picture: it almost seemed indeed as though the painter wished it to be hideous, so repulsive were the faces he had introduced, while the whole was swathed in what might have passed with the uninitiate for a pale purple fog.

"Good Lord, man!" cried Stephen, "what are you playing at? I thought you were killed."

"Get out!" cried the angry painter. "I don't want you in here, you grinning mountebank. Oh! this is the devil—the very devil incarnate."

"Just what it looks like," retorted Stephen, unabashed. "If you must cast out devils, I wish you would do it without bringing my skylight down."

Bodman, without deigning a reply, seized a very long brush and, rushing at the canvas, planted a pale purple streak among the imaged cauliflowers. "I don't believe you ever were in Greece in your life," he cried furiously over his shoulder.

"Don't you? Why not?"

"You were just filling that girl up with a lot of lies. You are an outrageous humbug, and I don't want to know you. Get out of my studio."

"You're wrong for once. I stopped there on my way to Japan."

"Then it's the only true thing you said to her, I'll swear. And what do you mean by letting her come alone to such an immoral studio as yours is? I say, Stephen, she's lovely. I haven't seen a prettier face for years. You ought to be grateful to me for it."

"Think so? Well, if that's your idea of beauty," he pointed with his chin at one of the figures on the canvas, "I don't know whether Mrs. Blaicklock would feel complimented."

“That’s my sister Jane, curse you! Get out, I say—you lounging—plutocrat.”

He picked up a couple of tomatoes and hurled them at the intruder’s head. The target dodged so that they hurtled harmlessly past and smashed lusciously against the wall. Before he could follow them up with a cauliflower, Stephen had fled.

CHAPTER NINE

It pleased Claire Stanmore to seat herself upon the chesterfield while Stephen showed her the portrait of Delia Blacklock, now growing towards definition on the canvas.

"She is uncommonly pretty—almost beautiful—if she is like that. And not at all common. I thought you said she was a work-girl before her marriage."

"A typewriter—not quite the same thing. And she is a rich man's wife now, which makes a difference."

"I suppose it really does in time. At any rate, it is going to be a beautiful portrait. One of the best you have done. You must introduce her to me, some day." She leaned forward, unconsciously falling into the same attitude as had Delia before her. The coincidence sent a crimson flush across Stephen's forehead.

"I am not at all sure that I ought not to be jealous of her," said Claire, smiling.

Wince though he might internally, Stephen never lacked a smile. "You ought. I am head over heels in love with her."

"Especially when I shan't be seeing you for three whole weeks. Perhaps longer." She sighed. "Oh, Stephen, I wish you had been coming with us. I hate going and leaving you behind. I wish I had never taken you down to Wintersfield. Why can't that horrid Lady Cicely wait for her portrait? Other people

have to. Will you be very lonely without me, you poor boy?"

Stephen clenched his teeth, repressing a sudden longing to unburden his whole heart, to her, of all people in the world.

"At least you have promised faithfully that you won't stay a day longer than you can help. We *must* have Christmas and the New Year together."

"If, when you wake up on the morning of the 22nd, you look out of your window, you will see me outside the garden-gate, waiting to be let in. Dearest, it is hateful; but it is really better that I should get things finished up and be able to come away with a clear conscience."

"I know you are right. And I wouldn't have you break your good resolutions for a moment, really. You so seldom make them, you know." She forced a melancholy little laugh. He wondered what she would think of him if he told her how all the while he was hopelessly struggling to break a bad resolution.

"But all the while I shall be longing and longing and longing for the sound of your dear voice and the sight of your dear eyes, my own boy—every bit as much as you will be longing to come to me. The thought of that ought to help us both to be patient. After all, it is silly of us to be so miserable at being parted for a month."

Stephen sighed from the extremity of his wretchedness. "I told you once before that when you go away from me, my guardian angel goes with you. If only you knew——"

She laid her trustful hand on his. "I know that you are good and true and noble, and I know that

you love me with your whole heart. I know that as truly as that there is a sky above us. If the whole world were to turn against you, dear, I should still believe in you and trust in you and love you with all my heart. Surely I need not tell you that."

"Claire, Claire, don't go away to-morrow. Wait a little—put off going for a fortnight—a week. I will manage to come then, somehow. You mustn't leave me now—not just now."

He was half kneeling beside her, with one arm thrown across her shoulder, his face hidden, almost as though he were a frightened child coming to her for protection. She laid her hand caressingly upon his head, and looked down upon him with happy pride.

"Who is silly now, dearest? Of course I must go. What would Margaret say? It is only for a little time, Stephen. Get up; there she is!"

Her sudden change of tone was due to the unnecessarily loud rappings with which Lady Stanmore gave warning of her coming. "Are you ready, Claire? You can't say I haven't behaved like a fairy godmother. I don't know what your father would say if he knew. And I am sure the Nicholsons thought they were never going to get rid of me. You really must come now."

She had been looking anywhere but towards the lovers. Seeing the portrait of Delia, she went up to it and examined it closely.

"Who is this?" she asked sharply. "It isn't meant for Lady Cicely?"

"It is the Mrs. Blaicklock I told you about."

"She is very pretty. A shade *canaille*, but nobody minds that nowadays. I don't like the eyes."

"Margaret! How can you say so? I think they are beautiful."

"Quite so. And excellently observed. Isn't that the professional term?"

She smiled at Stephen, who met her gaze with eyes as free from afterthought as her own.

"I have just been telling Claire that I am head over heels in love with her."

"You talk a great deal too much nonsense. As I have told you before, it is a mistake. People are always ready to accept you at your own valuation. Come, Claire, I really daren't keep Caudebec waiting in the rain. He will be saying that the accumulators have got frost-bitten."

She went towards the door. Claire lingered behind her.

"Come now, children, you don't need any more tragic farewells. You will see each other in half-an-hour or so. But you mustn't keep her moon-gazing too late to-night, Stephen. We have to make a terribly early start in the morning. And do try to be punctual for once. You will have positively no excuse for keeping dinner waiting, to-night."

Nevertheless, Stephen did not arrive at Eaton Square until they had begun the meal without him. The time he should have devoted to dressing he had spent in angry meditation, pacing angrily to and fro, and cursing the ever-smiling Adam whenever that sable gentleman dared to hint at the hour. He must stop it at once, he decided for the fiftieth time. He was a fool; he was within an ace of being a blackguard; he must get that infernal portrait finished at once; he must give up discovering errands which took him

Tooting-wards about tea-time; he must quarrel with Blacklock and never see his wife again. Having finally made his mind up, he recovered his spirits and completed his toilet with his usual thoroughness. During dinner he was as gay as the chastened melancholy of a farewell meal demanded; setting himself to win back into the good graces of Sir James and to efface the damning memory of his unpunctuality. He was at Victoria in excellent time next morning. "On the 22nd, mind," were the last coherent words that Claire addressed to him. "And don't flirt too much with the pretty model," said her stepmother with a smile not altogether without meaning. The train started, Claire waved the handkerchief which, until then, she had been too proud to apply to her eyes, and Stephen was left alone with his thoughts.

"Better write at once and say there is no need for any more sittings," he reflected as he left the station. Feeling the need of exercise, he made his way back to Chelsea on foot, going a little out of his way that he might pass the lonely house in Eaton Square. Sir James was detained in town by pressure of business, and as Stephen turned the corner into the square, he saw the hale old figure emerge from beneath his portico. It was a pleasant figure to watch, upright and benevolent, with honourable responsibility in every footstep, such a figure as one might turn to scan in passing and be thankful there are such Englishmen still left among us. Stephen always fancied that he could trace many of the daughter's qualities in the father, while physically the relationship was obvious: the same upright carriage, the same straightforward eye, the same regularity of feature, outlined, in Sir

James's case, by white whiskers, bushy, but carefully trimmed, after the fashion of an earlier day. Stephen, not wishing to meet the old gentleman that morning, walked slowly behind him, at some little distance, until he turned down a side street.

When the repentant lover came at last to Rodney Street, he found Delia waiting on his own threshold. He repressed a vague instinct to run away, for she had already seen him, and it came upon him in a flash that it was the day for her sitting. In the flurry of Claire's departure he had confused the date, and was secure in the belief that he need not expect Delia until the morrow. Before he came up to her, the door was opened by his negro servant, whose name was Adam—more formally Old Adam—a cognomen bestowed upon him by his employer in recognition of his proneness to certain human weaknesses. He was gorgeously attired in a very light check suit, with a flaming scarlet tie and an inordinately high white collar, over which he protested, with much flashing of teeth, his regrets that Mr. Cartmel was not at home.

Delia brushed aside Stephen's apologies. She was herself a little early, having started in good time and walked part of the way, so that she was all rosy with the exercise. She was in high spirits, too, and had never looked more daintily attractive. Her memory, it seemed, was better than Stephen's; she remembered perfectly that it was the day upon which his betrothed was to start for the Riviera, and made sympathetic enquiry as to her comfortable departure. She accepted his gloom as being entirely appropriate, talking and laughing sufficiently to compensate for any *lacunæ* on his side. Nevertheless, it was fortunate that the

imaged eyes were practically completed, for she kept her own for the most part veiled, flashing only an occasional glance in the painter's direction. He had observed a similar tendency during the preceding sitting; it was more marked on the present occasion, and gave him less satisfaction.

For his own part, when he spoke at all, he steered along strictly impersonal channels. Thus it happened that a new play had been recently produced at the Charing Cross Theatre, bidding fair to be the success of the year. Had she seen it yet? or was there any immediate prospect of her doing so? She looked up at him for a moment—and he was come to such a point that the flash of her eyes, as they met his own, sent a thrill through him—with an air of gentle reproach. She never—or hardly ever—went to the theatre. John was always so busy—so tired in the evening. She could not go by herself. Whereupon he changed the subject, and discoursed on the increasing popularity of music-halls and of its probable cause.

The sitting lasted the usual time, but he found no opportunity to say that it would be the last one. The portrait was, in fact, not nearly finished, and perhaps because of his over-anxiety, it now made little progress. When the time came for her departure, she lingered expectantly. At the close of the three preceding sittings he had seen her part of the way home. The first time he had volunteered to show her the best place at which to wait for the Clapham Junction 'bus; the second, she had been uncertain of the quickest way to Sloane Street, where she wished to do some shopping; on the third, the day being fine, she had decided to walk home, feeling the need of

exercise, and he had offered to escort her across the bridge, which proved to mean the South Side of Clapham Common. The weather still remained propitious; as she buttoned her gloves, she said that she felt tempted to walk part of the way. He scraped his palette with a very flexible knife and escorted her no farther than the door. He thought there was reproach in the voice with which she said good-bye. He was almost sure she sighed as she turned away alone. He returned to the studio and sat down before the portrait.

Certainly he might congratulate himself upon the eyes. The rest of the features were still hazy and indeterminate, but the soul of the sitter seemed to linger in the big grey eyes. There was a touch of wistfulness, of longing, even of reproach in them, that grew more pronounced as he watched. They were compelling eyes, that might lure a man's soul out of his body; that would draw a man down from heaven though all the angels sought to stay him; that would——. He wrenched his thoughts back to a calmer channel, took up a brush, and went towards the canvas, but stopped before he reached it. It would be sacrilege. He flung the brush aside, and buried his face in his hands to shut them out.

It was an absurd punctilio; it was even discourteous, to have let her go by herself, when she had so evidently desired his company. She had been gone but a few minutes; she could scarcely have got farther than the King's Road. If he were to go at once, he were almost certain to come up with her. He rose to his feet, and his eye fell on the chesterfield, where she had been sitting so shortly before. Come, there was safety in

that chain of thought. It was not twenty-four hours since Claire had been beside him, his guardian angel, as he had called her. If only she had not gone just now, all would have been well. He looked at his watch. She was speeding through France, thinking of him, trusting his honour and his fidelity absolutely. But the compelling grey eyes remained upon the canvas before him, they filled the studio; he could think of nothing, see nothing, remember nothing, while they were there. He trundled the easel towards the darkest corner of the studio, face to the wall, and set another in its place. It was impossible to work—Delia's eyes would not permit of it. And not her eyes only. The sway of her beauty over his senses held him, do what he might; the maddening temptation of her lips, the smooth curve of her white throat, the gracious lines of her slender body——

Through a misunderstanding Adam had set two places at the luncheon table, and some obscure prompting of southern gallantry had moved him to lay a crimson rose, from the big bundle on the piano, across one of the plates. Stephen, coming to the table, found it there, seized it, and, with something like a curse, flung it into the fireplace. Immediately afterwards he rescued it, and set it carefully among its fellows. He sat down and touched the electric bell fixed to the table. Adam entered at once, his face creased with its accustomed smile, bearing a dish in his hands.

“What are you smiling at, you bird of ill-omen?” cried his master, furiously. “Haven't I told you, a hundred times, that that confounded smile of yours is unlucky?”

“Beg pardon, Mr. Stephen, I does my best to

grapple with it. But, I dunno 'ow it is, I jest carn' 'elp smilin', some'ow." And he suited the action to the word, if anything, more widely than before. His speech was a curious blending of the full-throated utterance of the negro with the mincing word-clippings of the native-born cockney, which, under ordinary circumstances, afforded Stephen unflinching delight. In his present state of mind it only served to unloose the vials of his wrath, so that Adam fled before them into the kitchen, struggling with his features as he went. Stephen forced himself to eat, but the food might have been ashes in his mouth, and in a little he gave up the attempt. He stormed through the little kitchen, where Adam was washing dishes, his face sedulously averted, and, passing along the outer passage-way, knocked at Bodman's door.

From within came the sound of heated argument. The voices were those of Bodman and of another man, high and shrill, at the sound of which Stephen pulled a wry face and hesitated before entering. Remembering the alternative, he pushed the door open without further ceremony.

Bodman was seated in his favourite attitude, astride a chair, his chin supported by the back rail. He was rocking to and fro, so that his weight came alternately upon the front and hind legs, and thus gradually jerking himself towards the fireplace. Meanwhile he talked incessantly, his hair bristling with the joy of battle. The enemy faced him, undaunted by his approach, although it threatened a common catastrophe among the cinders. He was a little man, extremely plump, but with very thin legs. This, in conjunction with the important angle at which his head was poised, gave

him the suggestion of an after-Christmas robin, the more so that he wore a crimson knitted waistcoat. He was clean-shaven, his nose was very flat, his eyes the colour of a French ironclad. His cheeks were of that kind of plumpness which suggests that a finger pressed into one of them would leave a permanent impress—a suggestion heightened by his putty-coloured complexion. His lank hair, of no particular tint, was carefully parted in the centre. He wore gold-rimmed pince-nez; he was smartly dressed; his neat patent-leather boots and lavender-coloured gloves evidenced his pride in his small feet and hands; he carried in one hand a glossy silk hat, and in the other a gold-mounted umbrella. His expression was of serene self-satisfaction; his words came in an even flow, never losing their patronising inflection. He waved his hand to Stephen as he entered, without interrupting his argument.

“I suppose you would make out that Byron wasn't a great poet, because he flew in the face of convention? Or Shelley? Or Oscar Wilde? Which is absurd on the face of it. The artist's first duty is to his art—he owes a duty to the world, and he must let nothing stand in the way of paying it. If his domestic circumstances interfere with his art—if he can't fulfil himself without outraging the conventions—if the perfect fruition of his art entails the committal of a crime against the world, I say he owes it to the world to commit that crime.”

Bodman had been talking all the time of this pronouncement with equal vigour, but his voice was cast in a less regular key; his sentences were for the most part made up of expletives, and his protests were lost in the calm flow of his opponent's periods as were a

mountain-torrent in the bosom of a slow-moving river. Stephen realised that he must be championing the view that immorality is not a necessary ingredient in the making of an artist.

The new-comer, loving argument for its own sake, and holding it to have no necessary connection with convictions, hesitated for a moment upon which side to array himself. Personal considerations decided in favour of Bodman. He awaited his opportunity, which came when both the disputants were forced to pause for lack of breath.

"You are talking rank heresy, Boddy. You know as well as I do that if some really artistic chap felt it was necessary for his artistic salvation to run away with Skillet's wife, it would be Skillet's obvious duty to send him a telegram thanking him in the name of humanity." Mr. Skillet, who had earned from his intimates the nickname of "the pocket Othello," flashed a murderous glance through his eye-glasses at his impertinent tormentor, but scorned any verbal reply.

"Might as well say that a carpenter can't be judged by the ordinary standard," growled Bodman, now perilously close upon his enemy's position. "He owes a duty to the world to turn out good chairs, and he oughtn't to let any old-fashioned scruples stand in his way. If he thinks it improves his table-legs to break his wife's head with them, he ought to do it; and the magistrate who gives him six months for it is a Philistine and an outsider, I suppose. Ugh! All this bunkum about art and artistry makes me sick. Faugh! bosh! bunkum!" He eyed Mr. Skillet as though he meditated using one of his own chair-legs in practical illustration.

118 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

The argument, which had arisen out of a scandalous story with a much-advertised minor poet as its hero, continued according to precedent. The contestants alternately shouted each other down, tracked each other through devious verbal by-paths, executed surprising volte-faces when the necessity arose, branched away from the original contention altogether and entered upon a dozen side-issues, convinced themselves without caring much whether they convinced the other. Stephen contented himself with guerrilla-like incursions when Bodman was temporarily hard-pressed. The subject was not one which he would have chosen, under his present circumstances—at least, it must serve to weaken the haunting spell of the wistful grey eyes. Talking, or listening while others talked, absolved him from the necessity of thought; even the society of Mr. Skillet, bore though he might be, were better than solitude just then.

CHAPTER TEN

THE light slowly faded from the skylight, the fire died into a desert of grey ash, but still the wordy warfare continued. Bodman, indeed, began to show signs of restlessness, and argued with abated volubility. Perhaps because of this, Mr. Skillet, if anything, increased his fire of words, ignoring any hints, climbing higher and ever higher summits of verbosity. At last Stephen, in the true spirit of charity—for it was imperilling his refuge against solitude—rose to his feet and remarked that it was getting late. Ten minutes later he repeated it with greater emphasis, but it was not until he added that he was afraid they were keeping Bodman from a mythical engagement that Mr. Skillet broke off and said he must be going.

“I promised to look in at the annual flare-up of the Black Cat Club,” he added. “It’s held to-night. Rather fun. Would you care to come along?”

He addressed himself in the first place to Bodman, who declined the invitation on the plea that he had promised to run down to Ewell that evening, to see his people. Very much to his surprise, for he knew his friend’s private opinion of Mr. Skillet, Stephen, on being asked, accepted almost with alacrity, and proposed that they should dine somewhere together first. Mr. Skillet, whose most salient characteristic was his sedulous cultivation of the “arrived,” did not conceal his satisfaction. Stephen had hitherto shown himself

impervious to all his charms, however wisely he might exercise them. And Mr. Skillet, being encumbered with a private income, derived from a sleeping partnership in a firm of "Art" printers, and thus free to devote his whole energy to his hobby, had felt proportionately piqued. As the hour was growing late they decided to start off at once, and the last impression left upon Bodman's mind was of Mr. Skillet giving his companion friendly advice upon the art of painting, Stephen receiving it with a delight which was not altogether feigned.

The premises of the Black Cat Club were situated in a by-street near the Church of Saint Clement Danes. Its membership was chiefly among actors and journalists, who, without any very clear idea of the meaning of the word, prided themselves on being, in their corporate capacity, the last genuinely Bohemian institution in London. It was true that some of the older members found cause for lamentation in changes which had crept in, chiefly in the direction of greater cleanliness in the appointments and greater sobriety in the habits of the club and its younger adherents, but these signs of decay were not so strongly in evidence as to be noticeable to an outsider. On the other hand, the wearing of a frock-coat had ceased to be considered a phenomenon, and the rule which forbade the introduction of evening dress within the precincts had long been tacitly ignored. The club premises could still boast of being the most inconvenient of any within ten miles of Charing Cross; and but a few weeks previous to Stephen's visit a rash proposal to install a telephone had been negatived by an overwhelming majority, for the convincing reason that many of the

members were married men—a plea which appealed even to the unmarried.

The most sacred observance of the club-year—and one which had varied no hair's-breadth since the palmy days of which the older Toms (such being the generic name for members) spoke with reminiscent regret—was the annual “flare-up,” commemorating the club's foundation. Around it the whole existence of the club might be said to revolve; it was spoken of with bated breath for months before and after its celebration; artistic members vied with each other in designing the single poster, exhibited in the dining-room, which heralded its coming; musical members spent long days composing new songs for its greater glorifying; innumerable secret consultations were held by the executive committee to decide the exact form of the great event of the evening, more particularly referred to as the “Caterwaulk.”

It was to this solemn festival that Mr. Skillet, himself a Tom of some seniority, had bidden Stephen as his guest. They arrived in good time for the second half of the proceedings, the first having been consumed in a banquet for members only. Turning from the street into a courtyard and so through an inconspicuous doorway, Mr. Skillet led the way up a narrow staircase to a narrower corridor, one end of which was closed by a heavy curtain. At the other was an open door, beleaguered by a shifting crowd of men, while through it rolled a dense reek of tobacco and the sounds of a menagerie in mutiny. Beyond were two medium-sized rooms, communicating by an inner door, both crowded to suffocation. Against the wall of the further room was a raised chair, behind a small table—the tempo-

rary seat of authority. Its occupant was of pleasing suggestion, with a mild, scholarly face, round and chubby, so that he might have passed in heaven for a middle-aged cherub. He wore a knickerbocker suit of grey tweed, his shirt collar was very low, his necktie was of terra-cotta silk. Upon his head was a crown—a plain circlet of what might have passed for silver, with three small figures of black cats rising above it, their legs resting upon the circlet, their backs arched, their bristling tails meeting in a point above the centre, their mouths menacingly open, their eyes of sparkling red tinsel. Supplementing this was a large badge, about the size of a soup-plate, suspended over the wearer's chest by broad black ribbons. It also was of some metal resembling silver; in its centre was the painting of a black cat's head, having around it the inscription, "A bon chat, bon rat." Most men would have appeared ridiculous in such trappings, but their present supporter had about him a serene unconsciousness which became them with as little loss of dignity as could an emperor's state the crown of Charlemagne. The table was garnished with whisky-bottles and boxes of cigars, and around it were grouped the chairman's intimates and the guests of the evening. His formal introduction completed, a place was quickly found for Stephen to the right of Great Tom, such being the chairman's title of honour. For the moment nothing was toward; the revellers sustaining a babel of conversation, occasionally indulging in such amusements as hurling corks and paper pellets across the room at favoured friends, or striking up unearthly howlings without obvious reason. After a short time, however, Great Tom took up a paper from the table before him,

and having glanced at it, beat loudly with his staff of office for silence. This, or its apology, secured, he announced that Brother Tom Gregory would now oblige, by request, with his deservedly popular song, "The Cat turned Black." The announcement aroused a babel of applause, shouts of "Good old Gregory," the beating of tumblers upon chairs, and a sudden tempest of corks from all parts of the room. In the midst of it uprose an old gentleman, with long white hair and beard, wrapped in a sable cloak, making his way towards the piano in the corner. He bowed several times with smiling dignity, cleared his throat, nodded to his accompanist, and sang in an ancient voice that cracked whenever it attempted a high note and occasionally failed altogether on the low ones. He was evidently a warm favourite and his song an institution, for when it was finished—to Stephen, uninitiate, it seemed a farrago of nonsense—the applause continued until he sang it through again, and yet again. He appeared perfectly ready to go on obliging until the end of the evening, and his audience to encourage him thereto had not the chairman rapped heavily upon his table and called for the next item on the programme. Thereafter, for a time, the entertainment followed the lines of an ordinary "smoker"—songs, recitation, conjuring and card-tricks succeeding each other with little intermission, of varying quality, but reaping the same harvest of applause. Meanwhile the atmosphere grew increasingly suffocating, the consumption of liquid refreshment increased in direct proportion, and the chairman's hammer was more and more frequently called into requisition to check impromptu concerts from breaking out in different parts of the room.

To Stephen the proceedings were not exhilarating. He was, however, determined to lose himself in the company of his fellow men, irksome though he might find it. To force himself more into key with the proceedings he had recourse to whisky, a drink for which he had no natural taste. He was at first hampered in his laudable endeavours by the fact that, as a guest, he was unable to return the hospitality of the members, which he therefore felt some hesitancy in accepting—the more so that, with the exception of Mr. Skillet, they were all strangers to him. This difficulty overcame itself by lapse of time; for before the evening was far forward it had come to be regarded as a determined insult to refuse to drink with any one who asked you. With his nearest neighbour—a journalist who gave his name as Tom McAdoo—it being a club rule that pre-existent Christian names must be abandoned for that common to all—Stephen, attracted in the first place by his face, soon struck up an intimate acquaintance. McAdoo, after the convention of his trade, assumed a knowledge of most subjects under the sun: he had travelled considerably; gone through three campaigns, as a war-correspondent, and lived for several years in Paris. Thus they soon discovered several interests and at least three acquaintances in common. The journalist prided himself, above all things, upon his collection of Japanese colour-prints; Stephen, thanks to his sojourn in Japan, could speak of them with more than journalistic authority. The discovery gave a new zest to their sudden friendship, and Stephen promised to dogmatise upon McAdoo's collection at the earliest opportunity.

The night was still young when the journalist rose

to depart, intimating that the proceedings might shortly become uproarious, and that he needed a clear head next morning. "Now, don't forget," he insisted, as they shook hands, "you have promised to lunch with me on Monday." He took out a card-case, and wrote something on the back of one of the cards. "There—now you will have no excuse for forgetting. My address is on the other side. You will find it easy enough to get to Tooting from Chelsea, by Clapham Junction or Victoria."

Stephen started. "Where did you say?"

"Tooting. Please don't try to pretend you've never heard of it."

"Not at all. I—I've got some friends there, as a matter of fact."

"Extraordinary! Whereabouts do they live? I can tell you where I am by that. Brabazon Road? That's simple, then. You'll find Effingham Gardens the second turning towards Balham Station, on the same side of the High Road. Now, mind—I shall expect you."

"I won't forget." And to himself he muttered, "I suppose it's Fate. I wish to goodness it wouldn't interfere in my affairs in this way."

Many of the discreeter revellers were of the same mind as McAdoo; those who remained were the more untrammelled in their determined gaiety. The club war-whoop—a long drawn out "Miaouw!" sounded from all parts of the room at once; rival singers did their utmost to silence competition by force of lung; the rappings of the chairman's hammer went totally unheeded. Every one toasted every one else; a young gentleman collapsed stertorously in a corner, some

good Samaritan loosening his collar for him; an elderly gentleman with a beard confided to Stephen that he was an orphan. Mr. Skillet's guest proved himself a host; he joined in the impromptu choruses; he drew lightning caricatures of all and sundry, to be handed round for general admiration; he assisted in elevating Mr. Skillet, much against his will, to an insecure position on top of the piano, where he was detained until he had delivered a short address on martial jealousy and its cure.

Just when the noise was at its most deafening the electric lights—one of the improvements most deprecated by the older Toms—went out with a start, leaving the room in darkness, save for the glimmering of cigar-ends. From somewhere in the distance came a sound of chanting, gradually approaching. "It's the Caterwaulk," whispered Mr. Skillet. "You're going to see something, now."

A faint glow came through the doorway, and the chanting grew louder. A procession of uncouth figures became mysteriously visible by the light of the Japanese lanterns which they carried. They were led by one in the guise of a black cat, walking on all fours, his tail stiffly perpendicular. He was supported by a group of Druids, in long white robes and beards to match. Next came half a dozen comic-opera pirates, having in their midst what seemed a dancing girl in pink accordion-pleated silk, which she—or, more exactly, he—managed very dexterously after the convention of a skirt dance. Last of all came some habited according to their own fancy, theatrical properties mingling with the garb of every day in such proportions as the wearer felt most impressive.

They entered very decorously, ranged themselves in order before the chairman's table, and raised again their processional. The words were unintelligible; it was sung to the tune of "Onward, Christian Soldiers" in the slowest of slow time, the effect being dirge-like in the extreme. The subject, as Stephen was informed, was "The Last Strophe of the Black Cat," and it formed a ceremonious farewell to the retiring president, who must now render up his badges of office to his successor. The black cat in due course advanced to the table, lifted the crown and badge from the bowed head of the deposed chairman, and himself assumed them. The uncrowned monarch at once stepped down into private life, and, after a decent interval, took his departure into the outer world, being, indeed, of sober habits and having endured so long only in obedience to precedent. The black cat took his place, and, as a mark of sovereignty, sat for a short minute enthroned, while the masqueraders prostrated themselves before the new Great Tom. Next the procession was re-formed, the crowned cat, now erect, once more at the head, and moved slowly from the room, chanting as before. This time it did not go alone, being followed by the whole company in single file, Stephen among the rest, each with his hands resting upon the shoulders of his immediate predecessor. Then followed a revival of the old game of "follow-my-leader," the procession, grown to unmanageable length, following hard upon the track of the black cat, singing the while, pace and rhythm ever increasing in speed. So rapid did it become that time and time again continuity was lost, only to be recovered. Stout gentlemen gasped, red-faced gentlemen grew purple, bald-headed gentlemen shone like

light-houses. For the most striking feature of the whole evening's proceedings—and one not without its pathos—was the high average age of the revellers. Although the majority were perhaps not yet out of the thirties, there were many who were well on into middle-age, and quite a number whose hair was either wanting altogether or plentifully besprinkled with grey. Yet these veterans entered most determinedly into the spirit of the thing—and especially of the closing riot—forcing their stiffening muscles to perform unheard-of feats of suppleness, following the involved meanderings of the black cat with a determination which mocked old age and laughed at apoplexy, yelling the feline war-whoop as vociferously as could the youngest present. And always the leader increased his speed, and the mock priests kept close upon his heels, and the rest of the long line tied itself into perspiring knots in narrow passages and doorways, and those who had fallen out exhausted, fought for breath to fall in again as the riot should re-pass them.

It was striking five as Stephen's hansom at last deposited him in Rodney Street. His limbs were perfectly under control; he had been capable of assisting Mr. Skillet—quite unable to help himself, but all the time arguing incoherently that the whole affair was a pitiable instance of human childishness—into a four-wheeler. His brain acted automatically; he went through the actions of paying the cabman a reasonable, if liberal, fare; of hanging up his overcoat in the porch; of walking up the difficult staircase to the "bird-cage" without hesitation. But when he came to his bed he cast himself full length upon it and lay there

motionless, the electric light blazing down upon him till long past midday, when Adam, with a discreet ignoring of anything unusual in the circumstances, roused him. At least he had succeeded in his design of cheating the insistent grey eyes out of one night's empire.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE drawing-room at "The Laurels" was full of the scent of eau-de-Cologne. Delia had been crying, and was dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief to minimise their redness. She stood in the window-bow, looking blankly into the empty street. There was nothing more interesting for her to see than shiny pavements and the muddy roadway. The opposite house was called "The Durdans." Its windows were shrouded in Nottingham-lace curtains with blue silk waistbands. Between those of the drawing-room was dimly visible a bamboo-stand, supporting a blue and gold vase in which was a fern. Delia had looked across at "The Durdans" day after day, until the pattern of the curtains was as familiar as that of her own "art" chintz. A footstep came along the road, heralding a grocer's boy, an empty basket slung coquettishly over his shoulder. As he passed "The Laurels" he began to whistle a music-hall melody, shrilly and very much out of tune. Delia regarded him with favour, as varying for a little the intolerable monotony of Brabazon Road.

She was turning listlessly away from the window when another footstep grew out of the silence. It had in it something familiar, so that she masked herself in the curtains, lest she should be seen red-eyed by any one she knew. The footstep had at first the sharp definition of a sustained purpose. As it neared "The Laurels" it slackened and grew faint, as though the

oncomer faltered. Delia, peering from her ambush, felt her heart leap within her. It was Stephen Cartmel. He came to the gate, laid his hand upon the handle, hesitated, withdrew his hand, and walked on uncertainly after a hasty glance at the window, as though to satisfy himself he was unobserved. The colour flamed into Delia's cheeks; she ran lightly into the hall, and opened the kitchen door. "Are you dressed, Annie? You had better make tea in the silver tea-pot. I am expecting somebody to call." She hastened upstairs to her bedroom.

She was still wrestling with her blouse-fastenings, which were at the back, according to the usual perversity of dressmakers, and so always difficult of negotiation for any one but a professional contortionist, especially under stress of hurry or excitement, when the expected knock came at the front-door. In deference to the laws of social tactics, she waited for a few minutes after her toilet was completed, before descending to the drawing-room.

Stephen was standing by the window, in an attitude of dejection, which dropped from him as she entered. "It's Fate," he muttered, as one denying personal responsibility, when the door opened.

"What did you say? Oh, I thought you spoke. I am so very glad to see you. I was all alone. And very dull."

He inquired after Mrs. Reynolds and her sister.

"Carrie won't be back from the City for hours yet. Mother has gone to a chapel-meeting. She goes every Monday. They call it a Pleasant Monday Afternoon. It is all old ladies, I believe, and they thoroughly enjoy themselves, telling each other how badly their

daughters have been behaving during the week." She had intended to say something brilliant; she felt he must think it only ill-natured, and wished she had not spoken.

"I thought I would call, as I happened to be so near," he explained. "I have been lunching with a friend in Effingham Gardens, just around the corner. He has only just moved there."

He was moody and preoccupied, so that the conversation languished, and Delia was thankful when Annie at last brought in the tea-things.

"I have had such a disappointment," she told him. "I had an invitation to go to the Hippodrome this evening. With a cousin of John's. And now she has written to say that she has a cold and can't go after all."

"I'm so sorry. You go out so little, don't you?"

He was silent for so long that in desperation she was going to say something about the weather. He seemed to be studying the form of his right toe-cap with sudden interest, and to find it exhausting, for he was frowning the while. He looked up at last with a gesture as though he had just made up his mind about it—or something else.

"That was my chief reason for calling this afternoon. My friend is a journalist—useful sort of man for a self-advertiser to know. He's given me seats for *The Home-Coming of Hilary* at the Charing Cross to-night. I was wondering if you would be able to——"

"Oh, I should love to." Her ecstatic delight faded as suddenly as it had dawned. "But—I don't know—whether I——"

He divined her doubts, and abandoned forthwith his attempted compromise with his conscience.

"By a lucky chance he had three seats—stalls. He has something to do with the theatre, I believe. I do so very much want you and your husband to come. We will dine somewhere first—at the Savoy, I suggest, so that you can see the view over the river. It is so beautiful at night. Do say you will."

"It is very kind indeed of you to ask me."

"The tickets would only be wasted otherwise."

She critically inspected the interior of the teapot.

"Wouldn't Miss Stanmore——"

"She is in the Riveria. I thought you knew. You really must make John come. I never see anything of him nowadays. Let's see—could you manage to call for me? At the Megatherium Club—in Pall Mall, you know. John will know it; he's lunched with me there. At—say half-past—no, better make it seven. And we'll have a jolly evening. It will be a real charity if you will. I want cheering up badly. Is it a promise?"

"I will do my very best to make John come. I will call him up on the telephone. But——"

"Then he certainly will. So that's all right. And now I must be off."

"Couldn't you stay and dine here with us, and all go on together afterwards?"

"It's very kind of you, but I have something I must attend to this afternoon. It's rather important and I don't want anything to go wrong with it."

Nevertheless something did go wrong with it. When Stephen applied at the box-office at the Charing Cross Theatre for three stalls for that evening, none were to be had. *The Home-Coming of Hilary* was proving

an unprecedented success, he was told; no reserved seats were available for weeks to come. There was a remote chance that if he applied immediately before the performance some tickets might have been returned at the last moment, but it was very uncertain—too much so for him to risk it.

He left the theatre in a quandary. Was this the finger of Fate? Like most men without any definite religious beliefs, Stephen was mildly superstitious, giving more credence to signs and omens than he would have cared to admit. He had been known, indeed, to justify this mental attitude by the argument that, when you know nothing for certain, there is no reason against believing in anything. He stood, hesitating, on the edge of the curb, pondering how to escape without scathe from his self-created dilemma.

A sandwich-man crawled along the gutter. Stephen drew back to give him passage, reading, as he did so, the legend on his boards. On that in front was, "You will never regret it." He waited until the man had passed him, wondering if he might take this as an omen. On the hinder-board was printed: "See *The Clergyman's Daughter* at the Siddons Theatre to-night." The Siddons Theatre was only a few hundred yards from the Charing Cross, on the same side of the road. Stephen could not get three stalls together, but was able to secure a box, for *The Clergyman's Daughter*, as its name implied, was a musical comedy, already in its third edition, and with the end of its long run in sight.

Punctually at the appointed time the Blaicklocks arrived at the Megatherium, Delia shrouded in a long cloak with a scarf over her head, John genially un-

comfortable in a new opera hat. Stephen, who did not believe in doing things by halves, had an electric brougham in waiting; when Delia entered it she found the expected bundle of crimson roses awaiting her on the front seat. A table had been reserved for them at the restaurant, at which she was so placed that she might feast her eyes upon the river view, her squires to right and left of her.

Never was a host blessed with more appreciative guests. Delia was in ecstasies with everything—with the view, with the decorations of the table, with the deferential waiters, with the food, with the prospect of going to the theatre. She had never dined in such state before—even the sequence of the meal was a continual and frankly acknowledged surprise. The names of the dishes were in themselves deliciously mysterious. What, for instance, could be the meaning of a “Baron de Béhague à la Sauce Menthe,” or of a “Zéphir à la Monselet”? What, again, could be more ravishingly unexpected than that the meal should come to an apparent end—cigarettes and liqueurs being handed round—only to begin again immediately, and to continue as if nothing had happened? She felt, she said, like Aladdin when he found unlooked-for treasure in the African magician’s cave. Best of all, perhaps, though that she did not say, was the realisation that she herself was looking her very best. She was wearing quite her prettiest dress, her only evening frock, indeed, and for the first time. It was green in colour—and green suited her to perfection; it had originally, being primarily intended for possible “suburban hops,” been furnished with a lace yoke and sleeves. Delia had decided that they would appear dowdy at a

fashionable restaurant, and, rather aghast at her own daring, had spent every available moment since Stephen's departure in remedying this defect, so that her slender neck and shapely arms and shoulders were now bare, rather embarrassingly so, she found. The fairness of her skin was accentuated by the slender gold chain, set with little sapphires and supporting a locket which contained John's portrait, one of his wedding-presents; her hair was dressed becomingly. She had observed out of the corner of her eye, that as she passed towards their own table admiring glances were cast at her by other, male, diners-out, and, as was yet more flattering, that their female companions regarded her with cold disdain.

Her husband was in equally high spirits; he did not often allow himself such relaxation, and showed a business-like determination to make the most of it. He was proud of Delia's beauty; although in general he paid only perfunctory attention to the inner man, being intent upon weightier matters, he was by no means averse to a good dinner. He talked a great deal, about nothing in particular; he laughed, more loudly than his wife considered altogether desirable; he set himself to emulate Stephen's easy flow of nonsense, not over-successfully; most remarkable of all, he did not once refer, even indirectly, to business or to Mr. Jennings.

During the third course, a hovering waiter, noticing that Delia's glass was empty, deftly and silently refilled it. She was speaking to Stephen and did not observe it until too late to interfere. "He oughtn't to have done that," she said to John, in mock dismay. "I didn't want any more."

He laughed aloud. "Two glasses won't hurt you," he reassured her.

"I hope you don't dislike it, Mrs. Blaicklock," interjected the host. "I ordered it rather sweet on purpose. Do you prefer it dry?"

It was her turn to laugh. "I don't know the difference. It is a dreadful confession to make, but I think I have only tasted champagne once before in my life. On our wedding day. I like this very much indeed." In proof of which she raised the glass to her lips and sipped it. "I ought to be very grateful to you, Mr. Cartmel," she went on. "You are giving me three new experiences to-night. I have never been in a motor-car before—except a motor-bus, which isn't at all the same thing. I have never seen people smoke in the middle of dinner before. And I have never been to the Charing Cross Theatre. They say it is one of the most beautiful in London, too."

"I feel dreadfully envious." There was the suspicion of haste in his reply, as though he wished to avoid the subject. "One never enjoys anything so much the second time. Or it is so with me. If I have once been to a place I never have the vaguest wish to go back there again. Don't you feel like that? There is such a lot to see and do in the world, for one thing—and such a little time to see it in. I assure you the only reason I have managed to keep reconciled to my present studio so long is that there are six different ways of getting to it, so that I can use a different one every day of the week except Sundays."

"I know that feeling very well," said Delia thoughtfully.

"What about falling in love?" cried Blaicklock,

138 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

with the air of one proposing an unanswerable conundrum. "Couldn't you be in love more than one day, without getting tired of it?" He laughed until the glasses rang, and people at other tables looked around in feigned alarm.

Stephen was gazing at the red light of a tug-boat passing down the river. "That," he said, "is the exception that proves the rule."

"There would be a good many unhappy marriages, Mr. Cartmel, if your feeling was general. I shouldn't like to be always afraid that my husband was getting tired of me."

"Had you there!" cried Blaicklock. "According to you, Delia and I ought to be getting thoroughly tired of each other by now, oughtn't we, little woman?"

"Mr. Cartmel is a cynic. He is like the fox and the grapes. Because he isn't married himself——"

"You forget he is going to be. When is it to be, Stephen—if it isn't a rude question?"

"I can't tell you exactly. It is not fixed. Some time in the spring."

Blaicklock rose from his chair with smiling solemnity. Stephen, inwardly thanking heaven that he had no other acquaintances within eye-shot, smiled back at him with stern determination.

"I have a health to propose. Lady and—no, I mean Mrs. Blaicklock, be so good as to charge your glass. I wish to propose the very good health of our mutual friend, Mr. Stephen Cartmel, and to offer him my heartiest congratulations on his approaching marriage. Also to assure him, from personal experience, that the married state is a blessed one." He relaxed into his

chair and his ordinary manner. "Come, little woman, you must honour that toast."

"I am sorry, but my glass is empty. No, really, John, I mustn't take any more. It will get into my head."

"Drink it in water, Mrs. Blaicklock. It is just as effective. Here, waiter!"

"Not a bit of it," exclaimed Blaicklock; "that's treason." He shook his head at Delia in mock anger. "I'll take all responsibility."

"Very well, then. You are witness, Mr. Cartmel. Only half a glass, please."

"And no heel-taps," insisted her husband.

She lifted the replenished glass to her lips.

"Your very good health, Mr. Cartmel. And that of Miss Stanmore. May you both be very happy." She drank, and set the glass down empty.

Stephen hoped that the ordeal was now over, but he was not to escape without a solemn clinking of glasses across the table, and the abashed murmur of his own thanks for the semi-public compliment.

It was some little time after this and Stephen was recovering his imperilled equanimity, when another incident occurred which reduced him to comparative silence for the rest of the meal—silence which passed unnoticed amid the light-hearted chatter of his companions.

His legs were long, and he had usually some difficulty in disposing of them comfortably beneath a table. The present occasion was no exception. He endured for a time, spartanically, with only occasional twistings and writhings, when the muscles of knees or ankles became unbearably cramped. In time he

achieved a position of comparative ease, one knee resting upon the other, held in position by the flap of the table above. The only drawback was that the lower foot, driven by the superimposed weight, slipped always forward on the smooth floor, and had to be as often drawn stealthily back. In one of these blind gropings it was brought gently to anchor against what Stephen supposed to be one of the table-legs. He dared not rest his whole weight against it, for the table was a small one, and he could not risk its overthrow; but by exercising care he found that with comparatively gentle pressure and occasional readjustment, the problem of the errant foot was satisfactorily settled. For a time he was happy, until, as a waiter bent to pick up a fallen napkin, the support was suddenly withdrawn. He flushed crimson, and knew it, helplessly. Obviously it was not the foot of the table that he had pressed so confidentially. It must—it could only have been—that of his next neighbour. Unless, indeed, it had been Blaicklock's. If so, what had he been thinking these last intolerable minutes? One glance at the kindly face opposite dispelled any such idea. The man was smiling at his wife, listening to some trivial remark with the admiring deference he always displayed towards her. She then—was she thinking all this time that he was a low cad, capable of——? In that case—why had she not at once withdrawn her own foot? He glanced at her askance. Her face was turned away from him and the curve of her throat, the tendrils of her hair, or the white radiance of her shoulder, gave no solution of his doubts. He was afraid to speak directly to her, lest he should read an accusation in the tones of her reply. Yet gauge her thoughts he must. Blaick-

lock solved the problem for him. "Oughtn't we to be thinking of going?" he asked.

Stephen drew out his watch. "We have comfortable time. It is just eight, and it won't take us more than five minutes to drive there."

Delia turned her face towards him, but with her back to the light and the reflections of the table candle-shades in her eyes, so that he could not solve their mystery.

"Then you don't want to see the curtain-raiser? That begins at eight."

At least her voice was not reproachful.

"But—I don't think there is one, you know."

"Indeed there is. It is called *The Beggar*. I looked in the paper. To see how much time I had."

"Don't you trust to Delia," put in Blaicklock. "She is the most arrant muddle-head in the world. She was looking at the wrong theatre."

"Indeed I wasn't. It is the Charing Cross Theatre, isn't it?"

"I must have made some silly mistake. Did I tell you the Charing Cross? It is really the Siddons. They are quite close together."

"Then, isn't it *The Home-coming of Hilary* we are going to see?"

"I am so very sorry. I seem to have muddled the whole thing. No; it's *The Clergyman's Daughter*—a very different show. I do hope you aren't disappointed. Do forgive me."

He felt, rather than saw, that her eyes were fixed inquiringly on his, and would have given worlds to know the question that was in them.

"It was really quite my mistake, John. To tell the

truth, I was so excited when Mr. Cartmel asked us that I scarcely heard the name of the theatre. I would ever so much rather see *The Clergyman's Daughter*—and I'm sure John would. They say the other is horribly gloomy."

"One of the usual commentaries on the Seventh Commandment, I believe."

"When you children have finished settling the blame," said Blacklock, in high good-humour, "perhaps we had better start. If we want to see anything at all, that is to say."

As they glided smoothly along the Strand the shifting light, coming through the window, fell suddenly on Delia's face, and Stephen could read the still unanswered question in her eyes. The problem was certainly one which did not annoy her, for on her lips was the shadow of a smile. When they reached the theatre and were ushered into a box she made no comment, but this time it seemed to him that the question was answered satisfactorily. As he helped her to remove her cloak his hand accidentally touched the smooth coolness of her arm. A little shock vibrated up his own, as though he had touched an electric battery.

Before she took her seat she threw a comprehensive glance round the rapidly filling house. "John," she whispered, "I have just seen the Wimbushes. In the front row of the pit. Don't look; they are dying to nod to us." They settled into their places just as the curtain rose, Delia in the angle farthest from the stage, Stephen, after a vain effort at expostulation, in the centre.

The Clergyman's Daughter, which ran, in various

editions, for close upon a year, was neither above nor below the average of its class. Plot it had none; its dialogue touched the nadir of inanity; its music would have made a judicious barrel-organ grinder grieve. It was the work of eleven different specialists, and the connecting links were left for the actors to fill in according to their several tastes. The cast included a young lady with a very prominent smile and a salary estimated by the newspapers at £200 a week, another young lady who had just gained heavy damages for breach of promise from an earl, and a bevy of chorus-girls, famous for their charms and their liberality in displaying them. The hero was a naval officer, who sang a duet with the heavily salaried lady, attired as a Normandy fisher-girl, upon the subject of the Entente Cordiale, with a chorus which touched upon many other subjects, mostly patriotic. It was provided with eight encore verses, all of which were gone through without much encouragement from the audience, for which reason it had been unanimously hailed by the critics as the hit of the evening. The humour was provided by a very small and nimble gentleman who changed his costume with every reappearance, and who evoked roars of laughter by his humorous way of saying "Yessir," in the character of a waiter. Greatest ingredient of success of all was the catchiness of certain tunes, which, having been anxiously awaited by the audience in the gallery, were whistled by them so shrilly as to drown the orchestra altogether, to every one's intense satisfaction.

Stephen, as representing culture, would under any circumstances have felt it derogatory to his dignity to have derived any enjoyment from the performance;

with the table-leg problem still unsolved, he was as miserable as even his most cultured friend could have expected of him. His guests displayed as much happiness as did he the reverse. Blacklock accepted everything in the spirit of frank appreciation. He waxed sentimental over the love duets; he roared at the humorous interludes; he applauded, full measure, whenever the opportunity arose. Delia seemed as delighted as her husband; her whole attention was riveted upon the stage; she had, to all appearances, forgotten the very existence of her companions.

Towards the close of the first act she happened to drop her programme. It fell upon the floor at her feet and Stephen grovelled for it dutifully. As he returned it to her their hands met—for she had turned back her long gloves at the wrist. The same idea, to lay the programme once more on the velvet ledge, occurred to them simultaneously; thus their hands remained for a moment in contact. He thought that hers trembled—though it might have been only the sensation of his own; he was almost sure that it lingered perceptibly before it was withdrawn. At the same moment the curtain fell amid the thunders of Blacklock's applause, and the lights in the body of the house were turned up.

"Come and have a cigarette outside," suggested Stephen, "if Mrs. Blacklock will excuse us." Blacklock was nothing loth, and Delia smiled a gracious assent. They made, according to time-honoured precedent, for the refreshment-bar, where Stephen surprised his companion by drinking two brandies-and-sodas in rapid succession. "Fact of the matter is," he explained, "something in the dinner didn't agree with me. I felt quite giddy for a bit."

Blaicklock was genuinely alarmed.

"You've been working too hard. That's what's the matter with you. I thought you looked quite fagged out as soon as I saw you this evening. Look here—don't let us wait for the rest. I am sure Delia won't mind."

"Not for the world. It was only for a moment. I am quite all right again now. I am enjoying it no end."

"We all are. I don't know when I have seen Delia look so happy as she has this evening. I am so awfully grateful to you, old man, for all your kindness to her. She doesn't get nearly as much amusement as I should like her to. I have been so tied down to my business—and I sometimes think it hasn't always been quite fair to her."

"My dear John—you——"

"It is quite true. I was quite worried about her—she got so pale and peaked, I almost feared she was going into a decline, some little time back. Of course, it couldn't be helped. I have been in some pretty tight corners the last three or four years, what with bad seasons and one thing and another. I just had to be on the spot to keep things going. But now that everything is shaping so well again, I am going to make it my business to give her a good time—take her abroad for a bit, and go in more for society."

Stephen, having gained the attention of the harassed young person behind the bar, was securing a large box of chocolates, tied with a very smart pink bow.

"While I've got the chance to-night, I do want to say how very much I appreciate your kindness to her. I am sure it has cheered her up wonderfully. She's

quite like another woman since you have been painting her portrait. She does so look forward to the sittings, you'd scarcely believe. It's as good as a tonic to her. You are a true friend to me, Stephen, and I want you to know that I appreciate it."

"I wish you wouldn't talk bosh." His tone was not amiable. "The pleasure is entirely on my side."

"Yes—but——"

"I won't hear another word, I tell you. There's the bell. Are you ready? We ought to be getting back."

The curtain was just rising as they re-entered the box, the scene representing an hotel-garden in the Riviera.

"That ought to make you feel better," whispered Delia's husband.

"Feel better? Why?"

"The Riviera, you know. Miss Stanmore."

Suspecting Stephen's design of taking the chair in the corner nearest the stage and therefore affording the worst view, he slipped into it at once. "Let me go there, you ass," commanded Stephen, in a whisper which trembled with irritation. But the small comedian had just bounded upon the stage, dressed as a chauffeur and making violent love to a chambermaid, and Blacklock ignored all else. Stephen hesitated for a moment, scowling, then shrugged his shoulders, as casting the responsibility from him, and subsided into his original seat.

Delia found the second act even more engrossing than the first. She laid the box of chocolates in the centre of the ledge for general consumption, and, leaning her elbows also upon it, bent over towards the

stage. This brought her face very close to Stephen, who was leaning back in his chair; a loosened strand of her hair almost brushed his cheek. He could gaze unseen at her pure profile and the gracious outline of her throat, looming in white mystery in the reflection from the foot-lights through the darkened theatre. He forced himself to look away, at the stolid shoulders of the man who rightfully possessed her beauty, but his eyes were traitorous servants. His breathing quickened, his mind seemed to disassociate itself from his body, to watch what it might do with passive unconcern.

She drew back suddenly, felt along the ledge before her, in the bosom of her dress, in her lap, looked round as though she had lost something. Upon the stage the heroine of the breach-of-promise case was singing that she dearly loved champagne, supported in her efforts by a chorus of eight, attired as fashionable visitors, each holding a champagne-bottle in one hand and a glass in the other, wherewith to point their sentiments. "I've lost my handkerchief," whispered Delia. He bent down to feel for it on the floor; she did the same, so that their shoulders met and the slender length of her arm lay along his. For a second he continued the pretence of searching for the handkerchief, his soul watching him impartially the while. Then, as her hand met his, he seized it almost involuntarily. She shot a hasty glance across the box. The pressure of his fingers was returned.

"It was first-class," cried Delia's husband, in hot enthusiasm, as they came down the gorgeous marble staircase to the vestibule. "I don't know when I've enjoyed an evening so much. Haven't you, dearest?"

She was two steps below him and smiled back without replying.

There was the usual delay in finding the brougham, so that Stephen at last went in search of it himself. He stood by the door as they entered, and then closed it from the outside and said something to the chauffeur.

"I'm not coming," he replied to Blaicklock's protest. "I've got to go on somewhere else. He'll take you home all right. I have given him directions already. Thanks so much for having come. Good-night."

He raised his hat, and, without waiting for a reply, mingled in the eddying crowd.

"I'm quite worried about Stephen," said her husband, as they glided homewards. "I thought he was looking awfully fagged to-night. And he admitted he wasn't feeling well. He works too hard and doesn't take enough exercise. It's about time he got married to somebody who could look after him."

"He did seem to be rather irritable," she agreed. During the rest of the drive she was more than usually gracious. Altogether John Blaicklock felt that the evening had been in every way a great success.

A letter, with a foreign postmark, was awaiting Stephen when he reached the studio. He picked it up carelessly from the table where Adam had placed it, and recognised the handwriting. He dropped it unread, as though it had stung him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HE was arranging the last shirt in his portmanteau when the knock he had been expecting sounded at the door below. He had been in ecstasies of fear lest she should not come; the sound of her coming drove everything from his mind but the shame of it. She was his friend's wife—the man trusted him so absolutely—it was impossible, incredible. He left his packing and hurried down to open the door, driving back Adam, who appeared from the kitchen at the same moment, with revilings.

Her face was inscrutable; she did not offer to shake hands nor he to speak. He led the way in silence to the studio, and waited while she settled herself comfortably on the chesterfield. She was wearing crimson roses in her belt; some of those he had given her. He concentrated himself upon his work, lest the tremulous rise and fall of her bosom should awake too strong an ally in his own.

It might have been an hour later that he stepped back from the easel. "It is finished," he said, in a voice he would have scarcely recognised for his own, so fiercely had he striven to keep it natural.

"Finished? But you said—I thought—it was to take another three or four sittings."

"It has been quicker than I expected. At any rate, it is finished now."

"Then you won't want me to sit any more?"

He eyed the canvas critically. "It is one of the best things I have done. Your husband ought to be pleased with it."

She did not speak, but he could feel her question.

"I am going away. I am leaving London to-night."

"Yes?"

"There is nothing else to be done." He had not meant to say so much, and took refuge in rubbing a stroke of paint with the tip of his finger.

"But—won't it interfere with your other pictures? You have several not yet finished, haven't you?"

It was impossible to ignore the circumstances any longer. "I made a sketch for a new one this morning. Would you like to see it?"

He fetched a scroll of grey paper, and held it open that she might see the black-chalk design upon it.

"It is very nice. What is the subject?"

"Judas—betraying his friend."

There was a long silence.

"Don't look so miserable," she cried at last. "You have nothing to blame yourself for. It was my fault—altogether my fault."

He shook his head, almost angrily, and began mechanically to clean his palettes.

"I will go now," said Delia. "Do you mind if I look at the picture first?"

He stepped aside as she came down from the dais.

"It is very beautiful—much too beautiful for me."

"I must go," she said again. "Good-bye." She held out her hand. He raised his head. "Won't you say that you forgive me before you go?"

"Forgive you? I have nothing to forgive. Nothing

at all. You must know that." She paused—and her voice grew softer. "I shall always think of that night as one of the—I shall never forget it. I shall never want to forget it."

Her eyelashes drooped before his gaze. "Let me go now, please. I must not stay any longer. John—my husband is coming here to fetch me. I don't want to—I can't see him. I—oh——"

"You mean——?"

"I—oh—I don't mean anything. I don't know what I mean. I—I must go, please."

His soul, watching his body, wondered what would come next.

She was standing very close to him. His face was crimson and the veins showed, very blue, upon his temples.

"Won't you say good-bye to me?" There was a little catch in her voice. "I suppose we—we mustn't ever see each other again." There was a chair beside her. She leant a hand suddenly upon it, her body swaying. He feared that she was going to faint. He lifted his hands suddenly from where they hung beside him. His soul realised, instantaneously, that it must come to the assistance of his body. He dropped his hands again and turned away with a groan.

When next she spoke her voice was composed, almost careless. "I wonder if you would mind sending for a cab?"

It seemed that he would have taken her at her word. But he turned before he reached the door—as though the glance she sent after him had drawn him back, unseen though it was.

"You mustn't go like this." He held his voice between his clenched teeth, lest he should lose control of it. "I can't let you go—without——"

"It only makes us both unhappy. What is the good of it?"

"I can't let you go—without telling you—though you know it already—that—that—Oh, my God! I love you so!"

"I know. I am very happy to know it."

He kept his face resolutely averted—his voice resolutely impassive. "I won't," his soul prompted him, "I won't." And, for the time, it was still the stronger.

"I am going away—at once—because I cannot trust myself. I ought to have gone—a long time ago; but I had not the strength."

"Why must you go—now? I don't see—that—things are altered—by what has happened. I—don't want—you—to—go—away. Because of me."

"Because of myself. I am ashamed—bitterly ashamed. I didn't know—before—what an unutterable cad I am."

"You are not. You shan't say so. If any one ought to be ashamed, I ought. I made you take my hand in yours. I wanted you to. You would never have done it—if I hadn't made you. I daresay it will make you hate me—but it is true."

"You don't know what you are saying. It was before that. Oh—Cain only killed his brother. I——"

She came yet closer to him and laid her hand on his. He tried, very feebly, to repulse it.

"Don't go away. I want you to stay. I—I won't ever see you again—if you think it better. I know that we oughtn't to—any more; that we oughtn't even to

want to. I can't help being glad that you should love me."

He shook his head mournfully. "I must go—to-night. Or else—I am such a weak beast. So terribly weak."

"But not at once." The wistfulness of her eyes sank deeply into him. He needed all the help his soul could give him, then. "Not to-day."

"Yes. By the night-train."

"I see. You are going to—to her."

A footstep passed along the passage. She started and looked round apprehensively. "There are so many things to say. And I can't stop now. I don't want John to see me—like this." She waited for the answer which did not come. Big tears welled into her eyes. "Good-bye, then," she said, with the little sigh which had played such havoc in the past. She went slowly to the door. Opening it, she half turned her head and looked back. He had taken a step in her direction and she saw that his hands were clenched again.

"I want to give you a little keepsake—as a memory," she said. "May I? I have to go shopping. In Regent Street—to-morrow morning—about twelve. I expect I shall be able to get what I want at Guiseberry's. May I send it here?" There is no appeal more potent than the sound of tears in a woman's voice. But before he could reach the door it had closed behind her.

When John Blacklock arrived, ten minutes later, he found Stephen at work upon the clay-model of his "Narcissus." "Haven't seen this before, have you?" he asked with a laugh. "Didn't know I was a sculptor? Jack of all Trades, you know."

"It's first-class. Why—it might be alive."

"He's admiring his own reflection in the water. It's Narcissus."

"It's curious—but the face reminds me a little of—yes—of your own."

"Think so? Only shows you how well I can suggest character. I am always being told how conceited I am." John looked puzzled.

"Is it meant to be a joke?"

"At my own expense? Yes, if you like. Or a sort of memento mori, skeleton at the feast, writing on the wall—anything of that sort. Or a good bit of self-advertisement, if I can only get one of the ha-penny critics to notice it."

"You are a queer chap, Stephen. But what has become of Delia?"

"Mrs. Blacklock? Oh—she must have been gone half-an-hour now. Was she expecting you?"

"I said I would come if I possibly could. But I am rather late."

"Of course, she did say something about it. Thought you must have been detained. I'm awfully glad you've come, anyway. I hear you got back from the theatre all right."

"First-class, thanks. How are you, to-day? You quite frightened us both."

"I am as fit as a fiddle again. It was only biliousness."

"You ought to take something for it. There is a pill I find always does me good. If you like——"

"Thanks. I prefer to be bilious. Come along into the other room and have some lunch. You'll see then that there isn't much the matter with me."

“Mayn’t I see the portrait first? How did it get on this morning?”

“Only so-so. I’d rather not show it you yet, if you don’t mind. Wait until it’s fin—until you can see it in its frame.”

“I suppose it will soon be finished now?” queried Blacklock, as they sat down.

“I have been an unconscionable time over it. Couldn’t get started properly. It is like that, sometimes.”

“I shall be quite sorry when it is done. You have no idea how Delia has enjoyed the sittings. They have given her quite a new interest in life.”

“Do you notice anything queer about this wine? Here—Adam—what have you been playing at?”

Possibly Adam had a guilty conscience; possibly the suddenness of the attack startled him. He started and dropped the dish he was holding, a piece of real Nankeen blue upon which Stephen particularly prided himself. It shivered, and the potatoes it had held burst over the carpet, the culprit surveying them with a widening smile. Stephen accepted his loss with unusual resignation.

“That comes of your having grinned so when you called me this morning. I told you something unlucky, was sure to happen.”

“Beg pardon, Mister Stephen. I does my best to grapple——”

“Very well—it can’t be helped. My own fault, I suppose, for having it used, instead of keeping it on a shelf to be looked at. Is that what you were thinking, John? It always seems to me so insulting to a thing that really has a mission in life to treat it as if

it were as useless as—a minor poet, say—only meant to be looked at. Well—gather up the fragments that remain, Adam, and take them off—and yourself, too. That smile of yours has done enough mischief for one day.”

Adam, glad to have escaped so lightly, hastened to obey, smiling more widely than ever.

“He’s quite a character, that servant of yours. Delia finds him quite fascinating. But, as I told you, she looks upon your whole studio as a sort of little heaven upon earth. I hope you feel flattered.”

“I should be more so if I thought she meant it.”

“That only shows how little you know her. She always says exactly what she feels. I am always laughing at her for it. She has the most transparently open nature upon earth.” He smiled in affectionate reminiscence. “As to keeping a secret—but you know what women are.”

Stephen gazed at him curiously. “Was it raining when you came in?”

“Just spitting. That reminds me—I suppose you will be off to the Riviera very soon now.”

“Very soon now. In fact—I shall probably—Oh, before I forget it: I saw your friend Jennings and his wife driving down Piccadilly in a hired brougham one day last week. How is he getting on? He looks prosperous.”

“Excellently—by his own account. I haven’t seen him for a day or two. I hope it’s all right.”

“You are becoming a perfect Didymus. Why shouldn’t it be all right?”

“Two thousand pounds—or thereabouts—isn’t much capital for a business like that. Especially if you live at the rate he is living now.”

"Isn't it? I only wish I had half of it—just now."

When Blacklock came to take his departure Stephen wrung his hand with more than common warmth.

"Good-bye, old man. I don't suppose I shall see you again before I get back from Cannes."

"Not see you again? When are you going?"

"Didn't I tell you? I am rather thinking of going to-night. By the nine-something from Victoria. Come and see me off."

"It's very sudden, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Miss Stanmore is very anxious I should come while they are having such splendid weather. I hope to get Mrs. Blacklock's portrait finished up this afternoon. I am going to set to work at it at once. Of course I may change my mind at the last moment."

"Well, I mustn't keep you. You quite surprise me. But you always did make a point of doing the unexpected. I suppose it comes from the—what do you call it?—artistic temperament."

"Another name for a bee in my bonnet, eh?"

"Take care of yourself—though no doubt Miss Stanmore may be trusted to look after that. You might drop me a line to say how you are getting on. I shall quite miss you. And I know Delia will."

As being in keeping with his strenuously good intentions, Stephen set to work to finish his own packing, with such energy as soon resulted in hopeless confusion. He was considering how to include all his boots without having to take another suit-case, when Adam entered with a letter. "Don't grin so, you messenger of Eblis. What stroke of ill-luck have you brought me now?"

"On'y from the club, sir. Circular—not worth

openin'. Lookere, Mister Stephen, better lemme do that. You dunno 'ow ter pack a bag." He bent to the task, first handing Stephen the letter.

"Only a circular of some sort," he meditated. "Better open it though, as I'm going away. By Jove!" It was an intimation from the secretary that a cheque for £10 which he had cashed a few days previously had been returned by his bank, marked "Refer to Drawer." It asked him to take immediate steps to put the matter right. "But it is impossible!" He rummaged in the desk in which he kept his pass-book. He remembered, now, that a few days since he had received another letter, bearing the bank's seal, and that he had put it aside unread as being probably unpleasant reading. He found the pass-book, but it told him little—it had not been made up for three months or more.

"This is the very devil!" he reflected aloud.

At first he did not realise that his departure from London was now impossible—for that evening, at any rate. When he did so, he raged internally, and grew the more determined that nothing should baulk his hegira. He consulted his waistcoat pocket. He had a little over two pounds in cash. It would never do to cash another cheque—and risk it. For that matter, he would want, at the very least, twenty pounds, and none of the tradesmen with whom he dealt would cash cheques of that size. The only alternative was to borrow. But from whom? He ran over the likelier names among his acquaintance. Bodman? Was himself going through a financial crisis, as was not unusual with him. Blaicklock? Was, of course, out of the question. The circle narrowed the more closely he regarded it. One eligible was out of town. Another was himself

seeking to borrow. A third notoriously held by the maxim "neither a borrower nor a lender be," except when he happened to be short of money himself. For a moment Stephen had the wild idea of applying to his future father-in-law, but a convincing excuse was beyond his powers of invention. At last only one name was left—his maiden aunt Eliza. She was close-fisted, but she had a soft place in her heart for her nephew. There were certain preliminaries to be observed, in her case, indeed. The subject would have to be approached cautiously and with tact—a matter of time. He would have to give a solemn promise of repayment at a fixed date—and to redeem it, or that door would remain closed to future need. Fortunately, that would be easy. Stephen was expecting a cheque for some hundreds in the course of a week or two. The picture it was to pay for was not yet finally sold, certainly, but to a man of sanguine temperament the distinction was not great. So, at last, he bowed to the inevitable, gave up the idea of the evening train, and told Adam to fetch a hansom. He would invite himself to dinner, secure a cheque, cash it as soon as the bank opened in the morning, and so carry out his good resolution in spite of Fate.

Miss Cartmel lived in Orme Square, in a house she had inherited from the sister who had given Stephen his start in the life artistic, by continuing the allowance his easy-going father had been compelled to cease, owing to the complicated state of his affairs, shortly before his death. Miss Jane Cartmel had always maintained that Stephen was a genius, which belief Miss Eliza had inherited with the rest of her possessions. Unfortunately a genius was to her a dangerous, in-

160 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

scrutable being, not at all to be trusted and likely to prove a trial to a respectable family rather than a blessing. For this reason she had felt compelled to cut the allowance down by one-half, and to regard attempts at borrowing with disfavour. On the other hand, she was fond of her nephew, both for his relationship and his personality, and, had it not been for her unfortunate belief in his genius, for the abatement of which disreputable quality she had often appealed in prayer, he could have managed her with as little difficulty as had been the case with her more generous sister before her.

She was at home—and she was delighted to see him—though mildly reproachful that he had neglected her for several months past. These unpromising beginnings he gracefully eluded by the plea of hard work, which, as it gave her the opportunity of reading him a lecture upon the wisdom of putting faith in earnest industry rather than in meretricious natural aptitude, soon brought her round again. Unfortunately, his labour was destined to be wasted, for just when he was gently leading the conversation towards the desired consummation, he was interrupted by the entry of two distant female cousins of uncertain age. It appeared that they were staying with his aunt upon a visit of some weeks, and had just returned from seeing the shops. It was impossible to discuss finance in their presence, and Stephen found no further opportunity to be alone with his aunt. One thing, however, was propitious. They were leaving for Norwich by an early train next morning, and Miss Cartmel would be at home and alone until lunch-time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STEPHEN slept badly; it might have been better had he kept awake. For when he slept he dreamed, fantastically, of Delia. When he awoke, for the tenth, and last time, it was with the vivid impression of Delia on his brain—of Delia in some position of danger; he could remember no exact details beyond the anguish in her eyes and her voice as she cried to him to save her. So vivid was it that he could not for a time be sure it was only a dream, and sat up, fearful, with the sound still in his ears.

It was quite dark. He lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes, but so disquieting were his waking thoughts that in the end he got out of bed and switched on the light. He stumbled downstairs and selected two books at random from the shelves by the piano. He carried them back to bed with him, and settled down to a course of hard reading. One proved to be an old, dishevelled volume that he had picked up at a second-hand bookstall, because of the wood-cut that adorned the title-page. It dated from the early eighteenth century, and was entitled *A Catalogue of the Royal and Noble Authors of England*. The other, newer volume, was a smartly-bound edition of *Waterton's Wanderings in South America*, which he had gained as a prize at school. He plunged, at random, but he could not lose Delia, however deeply he might lose himself among the forests of the Amazon; and when he turned

to the *Royal Authors* and the sonnetteering exploits of King Richard the First, it was only to find the features of Delia lying in wait under the name of Berengaria of Navarre. He gave it up for a time and set himself to wrestle with his thoughts. So, between reading and writhing, the slow hours passed until the grey dawn crept in at the window, and the furniture grew slowly into shape, from misty visions into solidity, until the hum of outer traffic had increased towards its diurnal maximum. Listening to its changing harmonies, he came to realise how the note of London's breathing is saddened since the coming of the motor, its dominant becoming more and more the melancholy whirring of machinery, rather than the brisk and cheerful clatter of hoofs.

At last the longed-for knock came at the door, and Adam entered, struggling dutifully with his features. Stephen rose at once, though the desire for sleep came suddenly upon him. He touched his cheek—it felt dry and unnatural, as if it did not belong to him. He bathed his eyes; countermanded the warm water for his bath in favour of one colder but more exhilarating, from which he emerged gasping but very wide awake. He lit a pipe and smoked while he was dressing; went downstairs and forced himself to eat; drank coffee ravenously to fortify his nerves.

An interval of listless waiting followed. He could not with any decency present himself before his aunt until after eleven; the hands of his watch seemed to find nine an impassable obstacle. He fidgeted aimlessly; picked up a book and threw it down again; glanced at a newspaper and flung it aside. At last an acceptable idea came to him: he would walk across the Park to

Bayswater; it would be more endurable to kill time in the open air.

The day was fine, the sky in places approached to blue; there were cheerful cumuli overhead. He had dressed himself with a view to his aunt's prejudices, in his darkest clothes, choosing a low collar as calculated to increase the youthful ingenuousness of his appearance. His spirits rose as he neared the Park, for the sight of massed trees was as a tonic to him, and he insensibly quickened his pace. It was not yet ten when he came to the bridge over the Serpentine, and, leaning over the balustrade, gazed approvingly eastward. He started briskly along the water's edge, and the rise in his spirits kept pace with him. He felt that at last he was doing the right thing. He had no doubt that his aunt would make him the required advance. Within twenty-four hours he would be far beyond Paris, speeding southwards towards salvation, with this dangerous chapter in his life irrevocably closed. On his return he would be able to find a hundred excuses for seeing nothing more of the Blaicklocks. If necessary, he would have to pick a quarrel with John. Or he could stay away from London altogether until his marriage. Certainly he would never see Delia again. He did not even want to see her, he told himself.

As he came to the eastern end of the ornamental water and paused for a moment to watch the solemn canter of an old gentleman on a rat-tailed chestnut, a woman came from the narrow alley that leads, beneath cliff-like "Mansions," into Knightsbridge, and walked along the path beside the barracks. Her skirt was green, her coat was of sable; her figure, at that distance, seemed very much like that of Delia. His

heart leaped and stood still. Could it possibly be her? What could she be doing in the Park at such a time? The impossible certainly had a way of happening in this world, though. He became more and more certain that it must be Delia and no other. There might be a hundred reasons to have brought her. Involuntarily he began to follow her—crossing the horse-ride in a line to cut her off. He certainly must resolve his doubts, even if he did not speak to her. She was walking fast—he quickened his pace almost to a run. His doubts recurred—Delia's walk was more graceful, her figure more slender. Yet—

Hearing footsteps behind her, the pedestrian, who was perhaps expecting to meet somebody, turned her head. She was past middle age, with greyish hair and a complexion of wreathed vellum.

It would have been impossible to stop abruptly there and then. He walked on, still at top speed, turned out of the nearest gate, and loitered back along Knights-bridge, his mind aflame with the thought of Delia. He came to Hyde Park Corner and looked at the public clock on the park-keeper's lodge. It was close upon eleven. He turned through the gate, and, making for the Achilles statue, considered it critically, and read the inscription with grave care. Perhaps, after all, he ought not to disturb his aunt before midday. It would not be wise to appear too eager. He would walk to the Marble Arch and then turn down along the Bayswater Road. Arrived at his first goal, it struck him that there were a number of solemn squares in the angle between Oxford Street and the Edgware Road which he had never thoroughly explored. He had still plenty of time to make a tour of them.

At a quarter to twelve he was at Oxford Circus, and started leisurely down the eastern pavement of Regent Street. At ten minutes to twelve, Delia got out of a motor-bus at Piccadilly Circus and walked rapidly up the eastern pavement of Regent Street.

She was looking into the windows of Guiseberry and Company as he came up to her, seeming so ravished by the beauty of some "fine art" cushions, of mustard-coloured velveteen, with burnt-sienna Roman triremes sailing across them, that she had eyes for nothing else. She did not even notice Stephen until he spoke to her. She had not in the least expected to see him; had imagined him speeding in the night train towards Paris. She was sorry he had come. She had no idea how he could have known that she would be in Regent Street that morning. She had been thinking over things all night, and she had realised that he was right and that they must see each other no more.

He supposed that she must have finished her shopping before his arrival, for she did not enter Guiseberry's, but walked slowly along towards Oxford Street. His heart was in his boots; never had he suffered so bitter a disappointment; he had figured her all rosy with joy at seeing him again, thus unexpectedly. He bitterly repented of his cowardly scruples on the previous day. He had had his chance—and lost it. She could not have cared for him; she had only been flirting, very artistically, and now regretted that she had allowed herself to go so far. He had got himself into a ridiculous, an ignominious position; the only thing to be done was to get out of it as fast, and with as little further loss of dignity as possible. He certainly was not the man to force himself upon a woman, how-

ever adorable, who showed so plainly that she did not want him.

"Shall I see you into a 'bus, here?" he asked, with elaborate unconcern, as they reached the Circus. He would have given a good deal to know if it were really a smile which was reflected in the big mirror in Peter Robinson's window.

"Perhaps you had better. I am so afraid somebody should see us."

"Why ever not? Surely there is no harm in our walking together."

"I—shouldn't—have—thought—so—yesterday."

"Besides—nobody is likely to. You forget what a big, lonely place London is, and how you can walk about for hours without meeting anybody you know."

"Unless you don't want to."

Nevertheless she showed no immediate haste in the selection of her 'bus.

"What do you say to walking on a bit?" He put forward his bright idea rather timorously. "I hate a crowded corner like this."

They crossed the Circus and walked slowly up the further side of Regent Street.

"You really must go," she said. "I am sure you have a lot to do. How is it you are in London still?"

"I—I missed the train. Something—I couldn't go."

"I suppose you will to-night, instead?"

"I don't know. I can't. Oh, Delia!"

She disregarded his tendency to stop. There was a certain primness in her gait, and she was regarding the spire of All Souls' with more attention than it merited.

"Delia, won't you speak to me?"

"What can I say?"

"Do you want me to go to-night?"

The sky had been gradually growing overcast and a few drops of rain began to fall. She looked up, her cheeks very red—perhaps with apprehension.

"It is going to rain. Oh, dear me! and I have my new hat on."

"Let's take a hansom somewhere."

"Then you must say good-bye to me now."

"Would you—won't you—couldn't we get some lunch together somewhere first?"

There was a growing resignation in his voice which she did not altogether like.

"I ought not to."

He beckoned to a prowling hansom.

"Somebody might see us."

"And if they do?"

"We will have the glass down, please. I don't want my hat to be ruined."

They talked, rather vaguely, about impersonal topics, until they reached the chosen restaurant, sitting as far from each other as the cab would allow. The tension, if anything, increased during the meal; never had Stephen been more distantly polite, Delia more coolly gracious.

"Now you really must say good-bye to me," she whispered, as they stood together in the vestibule, gazing out upon a tearful Piccadilly.

"I can't. And I won't. I have a hundred things I must say. Somewhere—where we shan't be disturbed. You must let me."

"But I must go home. I—I have things to do."

"Then I shall come too."

She smiled approvingly at the new note of masterfulness.

"You can't possibly. Think what the neighbours would say, if they saw us come in together."

"We won't go in together. We will take a hansom to Victoria and you shall go on by train. I will come on half-an-hour later, as if I were calling."

"What is the good of it? You will only be sorry for it afterwards. You had ever so much better go away—as you are going—and forget that I ever existed."

She allowed him to help her into the cab without further protest. As they skirted the Green Park he caught at the hand which was lying close to his. She drew it quickly away. "You mustn't. Somebody will see."

"With all that rain and mud on the glass?"

"Please. I would really rather you didn't."

He forced himself to obey. Scarcely had he done so when she slipped her own hand gently into his and left it in his keeping until they reached Victoria.

She opened the door to him. "The servants are both out," she explained. "It was Annie's afternoon out and as they are sisters I let Ellen go with her for once. I had forgotten, or I shouldn't have allowed you to come. You mustn't stay more than five minutes."

She made him remove his overcoat lest he should catch cold on going out into the damp, and led him into the dining-room. It faced the drawing-room on the other side of the hall, and was furnished according to the strictest mid-Victorian tenets. It almost seemed as if Delia's reforming zeal had recoiled abashed before the cold severity of the horse-hair chairs and the

mahogany sideboard, and the portrait of the stern-faced lady, companion to the gentleman in the drawing-room, which glared disapprovingly from above the fireplace.

"There is a fire in here. You don't mind? It is so chilly in the other room."

"I prefer it."

"You will find that chair comfortable, for all it is so hideous." She pointed to the "gentleman's arm-chair" of the suite, which stood upon the side of the fireplace furthest from the window. "I will go out and put the kettle on in the kitchen. You will have a cup of tea before you go?"

She was bending over the fire, coaxing the dying embers back to life. With the last words she turned to leave the room.

"I want to ask you a question. Will you answer it truly?"

"I don't know. It depends what it is."

"Would you rather I went? Or stayed?"

"I—oh—you shouldn't ask me. Oh; you mustn't! you mustn't."

He caught her in his arms and drew her, unresisting, to him. She closed her eyes and nestled to him with a little sigh of absolute content. He rained down kisses upon her hair and eyes and lips, mingling with them incoherent words of love.

At last she broke from him, though he still held her by the hands. She looked up into his face, trembling and with quickened breath, as if half-afraid yet wholly content.

"It was my fault again," she said simply; "I made you do it. Yes." For he made a gesture of dissent.

"You would never have done it—if I hadn't made you."

He tried to draw her back within the circle of his arms, but she eluded him.

"I wanted you to kiss me. You wouldn't yesterday, though I did my best to make you. I hated you because you wouldn't, and yet I loved you for it. And I was miserable, because I thought that you despised me. And I was afraid that you didn't love me enough, or you could never have refused. But I know now. Nothing else matters. Nothing."

"And you do care? You, too?"

"I have always cared. From the first moment I saw you."

"And you have never——?" His eyes finished the question.

"I never knew what love meant—until I saw you. I never knew what happiness meant—until you kissed me."

This time she did not resist him, but lay passive in his arms, as he, with every other thought and feeling driven from him, sealed the depth of his passion with his lips.

"You must let me go for a little," she cried at last, between laughter and tears, "unless you want to suffocate me. And I really must see to the kettle."

A disquieting idea came to him. "Where is your mother?"

"She has gone to Kensington to spend the day with a friend. He is going to fetch her on his way back from the City. There is nobody in the house but us. No, you mustn't come. I shall only be a moment."

He was staring moodily into the fire when she returned, her eyes dancing with her new-found happiness.

"What is to come of it? Where is it going to lead us?" he said as she came to him.

"I don't know. I don't even care. I am too happy to think. What—has something—what has made you miserable suddenly?"

He touched with his finger a photograph, in a crimson velvet frame, which stood upon the mantelpiece. It was the likeness—and a very good one—of John Blacklock. Across the lower half was written, in his handwriting: "To dearest Delia from her most loving Hubby. May 24th."

"What about him?" he said.

"It is no worse for him than ever it was."

"Delia—you never cared for him? Tell me that you never did. He can't say—I haven't stolen your love from him. Have I?"

"It never was his to lose."

"Yet—you married him?"

"Why do women marry? I was poor; I had to make my own living; I was afraid. You don't know what it is, dear, to be a girl—with no one—and to look forward—to nothing. I wanted some one to take care of me—to shield me from—from everything. When he asked me—he was so—so good—and trustworthy—and—and a man I could respect—and look up to. I married him. But I wasn't a hypocrite. I told him that I didn't love him. It was because I was frightened."

She spoke eagerly, almost harshly, as if her old terrors came back to her.

"But he thinks you are devoted to him. I know he does."

"Why not? There was no happiness in my life—until you came. It was all grey and—ugh! But that was no reason why I should make him miserable. He is very good. You don't know how good he is—to us all. It makes him happy to think that I have grown fond of him. And I—one learns to make the best of things."

"If only we had known each other—before."

Her mood changed with almost startling suddenness. She burst into a trill of happy laughter. "You silly boy! If we had known each other then, we should have hated each other. Why, you are the very last man in the world I would have married. I shouldn't have had nearly enough confidence in you. That is one of the things I love you for. You are so—so different."

The photograph, with its kindly smile and patient thoughtfulness for others stamped in every line of the homely face, caught his eye again. He turned it, face downwards, on the mantelpiece.

"Poor beggar!" he said softly.

"You mustn't make yourself miserable. You belong to me now and you have got to be happy—or I shall think you don't love me. Give me that." She took the frame and shut it up in a drawer of the mahogany sideboard. "He had the chance of making me love him—and he lost it. I have tried to be a good wife to him, ever since we were married. Oh! you may think me wicked—and I daresay I am; but I don't feel so. I love you so much, I can't think of anything else. He doesn't exist for me any longer. Nothing—nobody does—only you."

A sobering thought was reflected in her eyes. "If he ever found out, he would kill me. He has the most awful temper really, though he never lets it get the better of him, as a rule. You saw how it was with that cabman. I am terribly afraid of him, really. I always have been."

"Much more likely to kill me—if he can. And quite right, too."

"No, he would blame me for it. It is always the woman who gets blamed. I used to think it wasn't fair. Hush—what's that?"

She started from his arms, listening. "I thought I heard some one at the front door."

"What then? After all, there is no harm in my calling on you."

"No. Not in your calling."

"I must get the tea ready," she said, a little later. "It will look more natural if anybody should come. You must stop here. People can see through the front door—right into the kitchen. You can spare me for five minutes."

"I wish I hadn't gone," she said, returning with the big silver tray. "No—don't. I didn't mean that. But—it gave me time to think—how wicked it is."

"We can't help loving each other."

"You don't take sugar, do you? We might have helped it at first. I've been thinking; and I'm not going to see you again."

"No, no; you mustn't say that. Don't say that. You can't mean it. Oh, I beg you——"

"Not unless you promise—not to kiss me—or anything like that. It isn't fair to John. Or to Miss Stan-

more. We can't help loving each other as you say, but——”

A door banged, stealthily, somewhere in the house. It was his turn to start.

“Now *you* are getting nervous. It was only the pantry door. The window is open. I know every sound in the house. I have sat and listened to them so often, alone.”

“Conscience makes cowards of us all.”

“You have got to be brave for us both. I always was a coward, so it won't make any difference to me. But I am really not going to see you again, for quite a long time. It will be better—for everybody. And perhaps, by that time, you won't care for me any longer.”

“I know you are right. We ought not to see each other. But—nothing can make any difference now. I did fight against it. I made up my mind—a dozen times—— Truly and truly, I only want you to be happy. I could have made you so happy if—— Oh, my darling, I love you so—so terribly! I can't tell you how much.”

He made the attempt, however, at considerable length. The darkness grew, first within the room, then in the street without; the street-lamps were lit, the sound of returning footsteps grew more frequent, as the first detachment of City toilers sought their homes, long before he had finished. It was the cuckoo clock, hiccoughing seven, that at last interrupted the recital. She released herself from his arms as she counted the strokes. “You must go; you must go at once. I had no idea how late it was. Carrie ought to have been back before now, and John and Mother may be here at

any moment. And the house all in darkness. Please—please go at once—I am frightened.”

“When shall I see you again: to-morrow?”

“I don’t know. No, not to-morrow. I—how foolish you were to tell him the picture was finished.”

“A little turps will soon put that right. But when?”

“Any time you like—if you will only go now.”

“I shall be at Victoria—the Underground. By the booking office. At eleven.”

“Yes. Very well. Oh—if Carrie should come in before you have gone!”

She was genuinely frightened, and he made haste to leave the house. Instead of turning at once in the direction of the High Road and thus meeting the ever-increasing tide of home-seekers, he set off in the other direction, with the current, and after wandering for a time in a maze of mean streets, finally came out close to Balham Station. He was amused and ashamed at the new feeling of criminality which oppressed him meanwhile, and at the anxiety, amounting almost to terror, with which he scanned the faces of the people he met, lest John Blacklock or Carrie should be among them. He had composed an appropriate explanation for his presence in that neighbourhood, but it had one fatal defect: he had, in his haste, forgotten to detail it to Delia. If she should tell another story, perhaps deny that she had seen him at all, the fat would be in the fire indeed.

When he reached the studio without adventure, Adam gave him a telegram which had arrived in his absence. It was from Cannes, and read: “Why no letter? Are you ill? Very anxious. Wire.” It was

176 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

signed "D," which represented "Dodds," a corruption of "Dearest" and Stephen's pet name for Claire.

He wrote out a reply and despatched Adam to the post-office at South Kensington, those in the neighbourhood of Rodney Street being already closed. As soon as he was alone he sat down to compose such a letter as the circumstances required.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It could not be said that the smooth progress of his love affair added at all to Stephen's happiness, for in his abandonment of self-restraint he had not been able to include that of his conscience. Nor could the charm of novelty that lay in his necessarily stealthy courtship of Delia wipe out from his mind the remembrance of his own black turpitude towards her husband and his own betrothed. He had never before found himself in a position at all approaching the present one. He had had many minor flirtations, some of them with married women, but he had entered upon them in the spirit of pure inquiry, and had never allowed them to pass beyond it. Although, in common with most men of his age, secretly despising their intellectual abilities, he yet preserved the reverence for women that he derived from memories of his mother and his aunt, both of whom had been of the nobler type of their sex. His own fastidiousness had also hitherto served him as a shield; he contemned alike the animal type of man who delights in "smoke-room" stories and regards young married women as his natural prey, and the married woman who seeks the advances of men. His engagement to Claire Stanmore had been another safeguard, coming at the time when his increasing success and consequent greater eligibility in the eyes of married man-hunters had made it the more needed. She carried on the tradition of his mother; he had never met a

woman who appealed more strongly to his higher nature; the better side of him was devoted to her. Although there was little of passion in his feeling towards her, she was the mistress alike of his affection and of his admiration. He knew that she would make him an admirable wife, the more so that her nature contained just the elements of strength which he realised were most lacking in his own. To which might be added the fact, though it was not one which at all affected him in his desire to marry her, that her prospective inheritance of a handsome income would smooth all anxiety from his professional path.

Thus it was that the sudden entanglement in which he found himself took him at a decided disadvantage. It puzzled him almost as much as it disturbed him. He was passionately in love with Delia Blaicklock; her beauty maddened him, she filled him with a fierce longing, differing both in character and intensity from anything he had ever felt for Claire; yet he could not in the least understand why or how it had come about. He did not, in his head, at all approve of her; yet he knew that she had but to hold up her little finger to make him go through fire and water for her. He despised the ignominy of his passion and raged inwardly at the chains which bound him, even while he was fettering his own limbs with them. At the outset of their intercourse he had felt himself so definitely the superior being; he had set himself, in the most harmless spirit of amusement, to gain her admiration, as he did with most of the other pretty women that he met, certainly with no idea of anything more serious than the lightest of light flirtations. He did not even know at what point he took the first step downward from

his pedestal, in the easy descent which was to end in his absolute subjection to her physical charm. Curiously enough, as it seemed to him, his feeling for Delia in no way interfered with his affection for Claire. The two sentiments had so little in common that each could retain an absolute possession over one side of his nature as if the other had no existence. In the same way, his friendship towards John Blacklock suffered no diminution; he retained his old liking for the man; he even felt sincerely sorry for him, that the wife to whom he was so unselfishly devoted should care for him so little.

The night after his declaration was as sleepless as that which had preceded it. It was passed under the dominance of two sensations, both novel to him, of shame and fear. The shame came across him in gusts, irregularly and without warning; he would be in a waking vision of Delia's beauty, in the rapturous recollection of her clinging arms and the intoxication of her kisses, when in a moment, she would be driven out by the realisation of his shame, so abject and intense that he writhed under it, physically as well as mentally. And all the while, in the bottom of his mind, was the sense of fear. He was afraid—horribly afraid—of discovery. Not that he feared the consequences for himself, nor even for Delia; both, he knew, would richly deserve any punishment that might befall them. But he quaked at the misery he was inevitably building up for his betrothed—and for his friend: both of whom had such absolute trust in his honour. It would ruin their lives; it would probably kill Claire. It must not be.

A dozen times he made up his mind—as he had made

it up a hundred times already—that the affair must go no farther. And even as he did so, the vision of the unhappiness it would cause to Delia would bring the vivid image of her beauty and her tears before him again, to the forgetting of all else. After all, it was not as if either of them meditated any real wrong to those others. They had decided on that even in the rapture of their first self-revelations. Delia had said so as well as himself. A few stolen interviews—a few stolen kisses—would not irrevocably injure either Claire or Blacklock. If the affair was conducted discreetly and due precautions taken, there was no reason, for that matter, why there should be any discovery. The date of his departure for Cannes was very near—little more than a fortnight ahead—and after that it would be time enough to consider what was to be done.

He arrived at the trysting-place ten minutes too early, which time he passed in walking up and down the pavement in front of the station with an assumption of haste and purpose, lest he should be seen by some acquaintance and recognised as obviously awaiting some one. Delia, who was exactly punctual, was very nervous. It was absolute madness, she insisted, to choose such a place for meeting, considering that Victoria was the station to which the whole of feminine Tooting came on its way to the West End shops. Some one who knew her was bound to see them, if the disaster had not already happened unknown to them. "Take me somewhere quiet, where nobody will see us," she implored; "or I shall have to go back at once."

He suggested the British Museum as an unfrequented spot, and within a few seconds they were on

their way thither in a four-wheeler, which Delia insisted upon as offering less chance of being seen than would a hansom. The British Museum might have been designed expressly as a meeting-place for lovers who desire to exchange confidences without being overlooked or overseen. There are numbers of dark and quiet nooks among the ancient sarcophagi; there are long galleries devoted to Assyrian bas-reliefs which are almost always empty; there are other rooms, approached by inconspicuous doors, through which the visitor in search of amusement or instruction rarely penetrates, wherein you may interchange whispers, or even, if you are lucky, kisses, as secure from interruption as though you were in the heart of the Sahara. Delia and Stephen did not know much more of the contents of the Museum after the two hours they spent there together, than before; but either would have been prepared to give a certificate that it is quite the most fascinating and very much the best-conducted institution of its kind in the world. Afterwards they lunched together at a quiet little restaurant in the neighbourhood. Much to her companion's disappointment Delia was forced to return to Tooting by three, it being the day upon which she was nominally "at home." If she stopped in, she complained, nobody ever came, but if she went out, some visitor was sure to arrive from the other end of London, and explanations of the cause of her absence were as sure to be needed sooner or later. On the present occasion also, her mother would be anxious if she stayed away very long; she had ostensibly only gone as far as Oxford Street to buy some trimmings for a hat, and had promised to be back in time for lunch.

It seemed to Stephen that the presence of Mrs. Reynolds in the house at Brabazon Road was likely to prove a serious obstacle in the way of their meetings, the more so that Delia had hitherto usually spent the greater part of the day at home, only going out when imperious necessity arose. It appeared, however, that his companion had already laid her plans for the surmounting of this difficulty, and, on the plea that she needed change of air and that London never suited her in winter, was sending Mrs. Reynolds down to Barchester for a fortnight, there to stay with an old friend whom she had been intending to revisit for some years past. Further to facilitate her own absences from home, Delia had suddenly professed conversion to the doctrine of fresh air, and her determination to take more exercise in the open: a determination which her husband had welcomed as excellently wise.

During the next fortnight the lovers saw each other daily. Sometimes they were forced by circumstances to limit their stolen interviews to a few minutes, but on more fortunate occasions they spent the greater part of the day together, making excursions into the country—for the weather was phenomenally fine for the time of year—or studying some of the institutions of London, such as the Zoological Gardens, Kew, or the Crystal Palace, which, being both true Londoners, they had hitherto known chiefly at second-hand. One rapturous day they spent, for instance, in Epping Forest, where neither had ever been before, and where the deserted glades offered them even greater opportunities of privacy than had the British Museum. This excursion, it is true, was somewhat marred, towards its close, by the fact that they had wandered too far

from the railway-station to which they had travelled, and missed their chosen train back to town, so that Delia did not reach home until nine o'clock at night, by which time her husband was almost out of his mind with anxiety. She had, however, no difficulty in inventing an excuse: that she had been looking at the shops in Oxford Street; had lost count of time in her admiration of their Christmas-tide display; had suddenly discovered that she had not brought sufficient money to take her back to Tooting, and had been compelled to walk the whole way home; that she was very tired, had a bad headache, and did not want to talk. All of which was accepted as beyond question, and procured her much sympathy from her unsuspecting husband.

Upon another occasion, when they were exploring the wilds of Hampstead Heath, it was Stephen's turn to feel anxious; for, as they were coming homewards down Heath Street, walking closer together than was consistent with caution and with their feelings towards each other written very plainly upon their faces, they came suddenly upon an intimate friend of Sir James Stanmore, an elderly gentleman named Bracegirdle. Fortunately he was very short-sighted, and the dusk was already falling, so that he did not recognise Sir James' future son-in-law.

Delia went twice to Stephen's studio for further sittings. The second time John came to fetch her, and they remained to lunch. Stephen explained to him that he had been prevented from leaving London at the last moment by a commission from Lord Wintersfield, to paint the portrait of his daughter, Lady Cicely, for her wedding, which was taking place almost immediately—

a commission which, coming from such a quarter, could not be put on one side. As to Delia's portrait, in his efforts to finish it in a hurry he had spoilt it, and much of it would now have to be repainted altogether.

During all this time the lovers busied themselves in making the most virtuous resolutions, frequently convincing themselves, if not each other, that they fully intended to carry them out. They soon argued themselves free from any blame in the matter; it was their misfortune that they should have fallen in love, but no fair-minded person could say that it was their fault. If any one, in fact, were to blame, it was John, who had, as it were, thrown them into each other's arms. Again, they were not going to do anything that either of them need be ashamed of; this was one of the arguments in which Stephen found much comfort for his soul. If anything, they were very deeply to be pitied for the painful position in which fate had placed them. It would be very hard indeed—quite out of the question, in fact—if they could not seek what little comfort was possible in the society of each other. If they kissed, such kisses were of the nature of a solemn rite, symbolising their own self-sacrifice upon the altar of marital fidelity.

Their virtuous mood continued until the time came for Stephen's departure for Cannes. It was, perhaps, their anticipatory misery over this parting which held in check a growing tendency on both sides to consider themselves the injured parties and, as such, deserving to be praised rather than blamed for their almost punctilious regard for other people's feelings, however well meaning those others might be.

In order to keep his promise to Claire of arriving on the 22nd, Stephen should have left London at latest by the night train on Tuesday. They had arranged to meet in Hyde Park that morning and to lunch together as a farewell ceremony. As it happened, Mrs. Reynolds, who had a habit of doing what was least expected of her, arrived home from Barchester, late the previous evening, instead of waiting until the Wednesday, as Delia had arranged. In consequence her daughter was prevented from keeping the appointment, and was reduced to sending an agonised telegram begging Stephen not to go until he had seen her. Nothing more unwelcome could have happened to him, for he knew that Claire's disappointment would be extreme, and he was now more than ever loth to do anything which might cause her pain. The terms of Delia's command left him, however, no alternative, and very reluctantly he was forced to draft out a telegram to his fiancée, setting forth that he was not very well—nothing that need cause her uneasiness—but must defer his journey until the following day. Early upon that day, Delia made her appearance at the studio, very apologetic, but not at all ill-pleased that he should have obeyed her wishes, being perfectly well aware how determined he had been that nothing should be allowed to interfere with his intention of keeping his promise to Claire. The farewell luncheon was naturally not a very cheerful function, the more so that Delia showed an uncomfortable tendency to dissolve into tears at frequent intervals, which she defended on the grounds that it was imperatively necessary that she should preserve her accustomed cheerfulness at home. Nevertheless, her sorrow did not prevent her from ar-

ranging the method by which their correspondence was to be carried on during his absence, she being to address letters for him to the Poste Restante at Cannes, under the name of Wilson, lest by some mischance they should fall into hands not intended for them. He, for his part, was to write to her, as Miss Hughes, to an address in the Clapham Road, that of a newspaper shop which drove a business of the "letters may be addressed here" description.

So long-drawn-out was their parting that Stephen was within an ace of losing his train for the second time, while Delia was forced to forget her grief in concocting a convincing explanation of her long absence from home—a task the more difficult that she had to satisfy her mother as well as her less exacting husband.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"You really ought to go back," insisted Claire. They were sitting on the balcony of the villa, gazing out over the sunlit sea.

"But I don't want to. I am quite happy here."

"Yes, dearest. But—I am not a very good person to persuade you, because you know how I love having you with me. But there is your work to be thought of."

"I am doing no end of sketches. They will all come in useful some day."

"There is Lady Cicely's portrait. If only you could have finished it before you came!"

"Bother Lady Cicely!"

"That is just what you are doing. You know how soon the wedding is to be. Lord Wintersfield will be furious if it isn't ready in time. And that commission may lead to a lot of others. I am so anxious you should get a lot of work done, and make heaps and heaps and heaps of money. You know what it means to us—both."

"I would much rather stay. You know what it means to us—both."

She laughed. "Is it a baby I am going to marry or a grown man?"

The letter which he had found waiting for him at the Poste Restante that morning seemed to burn in his pocket. He had a mad impulse to pull it out and hand it to her.

“ Frankly, Claire, I don’t want to go back—just yet. I honestly believe it would be better—better for us both—if I stayed on for a time. Won’t you let me? ”

She laughed again. His unwillingness to leave her almost made her forget the pang that his leaving would cause her.

“ It is no good looking at me in that appealing way. You are not going to make me say what I know I oughtn’t to—much as I want to. Seriously, it isn’t for so very long. We shall be home again in six weeks now. And, after that, perhaps, if you are very good, my father may be brought to see that we need not wait any longer. That is one of the reasons why I am so anxious you should go. He was saying to Margaret, only last night, that it was time you got back to your work again. I want to humour him in every way—just now.”

Thus it was that Stephen was able to keep the appointment which Delia had made in her letter. It was true that he kept it only in the firm intention that it should be the last. During his stay at Cannes he had found time for serious self-communion. He had realised to the full the insanity of his behaviour. There was always the risk of discovery. They had been marvellously fortunate up to the present, but such a run of good luck could not go on for ever. It was not as if he ever meant to go to extremes: that would have been another matter altogether; but to risk so much for the mere luxury of what was, after all, only an idle flirtation, was not to be thought of for another moment. He would keep this last appointment—he owed so much to Delia—but it must be the last, and,

however unpleasant he might find it, he must make this clear to her.

He was at the trysting-place—in Kensington Gardens—in good time, and, while he waited, rehearsed the little scene of renunciation. He could scarcely realise that, in probably less than an hour, the whole burden of anxious deceit under which he had been labouring for so long would be lifted from his shoulders. It was certainly high time.

Delia did not keep her appointment. He waited for half-an-hour—for an hour—but still she did not come. He consulted her letter, and found he had made no mistake in time or place. All sorts of unpleasant possibilities suggested themselves. Could she be ill? Could she have been suddenly overcome with remorse and confessed everything to her husband? Could she have foolishly preserved one of his letters, despite his injunctions? and had it been discovered? Could she—and that was the most painful thought of all—have ceased to care for him and have decided to see him no more?

He waited for two hours—a prey to increasingly painful forebodings. He pictured Delia run over by a motor-bus and dying with his name upon her lips. He could hear her sobs as she made her confession to her husband—exaggerating what had taken place in the extremity of her remorse. He imagined her suddenly taken ill—calling upon him in her delirium—with her relations drinking in her words at the bedside.

At last he could stand the strain no longer. He left the Park almost at a run and sought the nearest public telephone office. He could not remember Blaicklock's exact number, and turned the pages of the directory

with trembling fingers. He put the receiver to his ear. Blaicklock and Company were engaged. He waited minutes that seemed hours, and tried again. A clerk answered him. Yes; Mr. Blaicklock was in; he would come in a moment; would Stephen hold the line. He held it, writhing. What would be the inflection of the voice that should answer him?

It was as hearty, as transparently friendly, as unsuspecting as ever. John was delighted to hear of Stephen's safe return and that he had had such a good time. Hoped that it would have quite set him up again. Yes; Delia was very well indeed. She had been rather seedy—an influenza cold—but had picked up wonderfully in the last day or two. They had both been looking forward to seeing him again. Delia would be delighted when she heard. Couldn't he look them up that evening? If not—when? He would ask Delia to arrange a day.

Before the words were out of his mouth, Stephen was cursing his own exaggerated caution in refusing. At least all was well, so far as Blaicklock was concerned. But the mystery of Delia's non-appearance was if possible increased. Perhaps he might find a letter explaining it when he got back to the studio. There was nothing—some bills, a badly needed cheque—that was all. The last post beat its way along the street, and still nothing. There was nothing—save the offer of a commission—next morning. He must do something.

He bethought himself that "The Laurels" was on the telephone, and anathematised his own folly in not having thought of it before. A servant answered him. Mrs. Blaicklock was not at home; she had only slipped out to do some shopping. Would he ring up again

later. He waited an hour. Mrs. Blacklock had not yet returned. Mrs. Reynolds? She did not understand the telephone.

He left the telephone office between rage and fear. He had some hope that Delia might have wired to him in his absence. There was no telegram awaiting him. He listened to every step that passed along the street, hoping that it might be a telegraph boy; but he was always disappointed. Should he go over to Tooting on the chance of finding her returned? He could not make up his mind. Twice he started and twice returned. Supposing, as seemed the only possible explanation, she had decided not to see him again? He would only anger her by forcing himself, unwelcome, into her presence. What if she should receive him with a face of cold indifference?

He had just determined that, come what might, he must learn the worst, when a knock came at the door. It was a telegram. At last. He opened it with trembling fingers. It was from John—asking him to come that evening.

There was no doubt as to the warmth of his welcome. John gripped his hand as though he were never going to leave it go. Mrs. Reynolds, who had discovered in him a likeness to a younger brother who had been in the Post Office and who had died some forty years before, almost wept over him. Even Carrie greeted him as an old and valued friend. Only—Delia had a bad nervous headache; and had to go to bed and asked, by the servant, if he would excuse her. His worst fears were realised.

By next morning he had argued himself into hoping that he might be mistaken in his reading of her be-

haviour. At least it could make things no worse if he made certain. He telephoned—waiting until just after the hour that John was in the habit of leaving for the City. The servant answered him again. Was Mr. Blacklock at home? He had just left—not ten minutes before. Stephen was very disappointed. Mrs. Blacklock—was she better this morning? Yes; would he wait a minute?

There is nothing specially significant in the words “Are you there?” but Stephen hung upon them as might a criminal upon his judge’s sentence. Yes; she was feeling quite all right again. It had only been a nervous headache. She was delighted to know that he had returned safely; had been so very sorry that she was not well enough to see him overnight.

“I must see you at once. Why did you not come?”

“Carrie, did you say? Yes; she is here. In the hall now. Do you want to speak to her? Yes—she is very late this morning—quite disgracefully so.” He heard her say something to her sister and laugh. He remembered then that the instrument was in the front hall—in the most public position in the house.

“No,” she replied to some question he had not asked. “I could not very well. I must tell you about it some other time. What do you say?”

“Tell me where I can see you. To-day. At once. I shall go mad if you don’t.”

“Did you have a fine crossing? You came to Victoria? Victoria did you say? Oh, yes; Victoria, of course.”

“I understand. What time?”

“Yes; the weather has been wonderful, hasn’t it? What do you say? You had twelve days of rain.

Twelve—in the Riviera? Exactly twelve. How could you remember to count them?”

“Don’t fail me this time. I implore you not to.”

“Surely not. In a cave? I didn’t know there were any there. What a funny idea. Underground all the time? Really. You must have had a delightful time. Are Miss Stanmore and her family all well? Yes; we must try to fix a day. I suppose you are very busy just now. I mustn’t keep you from your work any longer. Good-bye.”

She was paler than usual, he thought, when he came up to her, for she was already waiting for him. His heart swelled as he thought that she had been fretting. She was very nervous too, as he could tell by the anxious if veiled glances she flashed at all who passed them. “I can only stay a minute,” she protested, as they shook hands. “I oughtn’t really to have come. I am only supposed to have gone down the High Road to do some shopping.”

“I have so much—so very much to say. After all this time. Let us take a train somewhere. We can’t talk here—in all this crowd.”

“I couldn’t possibly. Besides—some one would be sure to see us. And what is the good? I have only come to say good-bye.”

Until that moment he had scarcely realised how much he cared.

“We will go into the Chatham station, separately. You wait in the waiting-room until I have looked up a train somewhere and got the tickets. Then you can get in first and I will wait until just before the train is going to start and jump in after you. It will be perfectly safe. No one will think we are together.”

She again protested that she couldn't possibly. That she must get home at once. That it was absolute madness. That it must be the last time. That she was terribly frightened. That he must choose a place from which she could get back by four at the very latest.

The proposed manœuvre was executed with perfect success, but even while they were congratulating themselves on having secured an empty carriage, when the guard had already blown his whistle and waved his flag, the door was hastily opened by an inspector. Stephen had tipped the guard lavishly for his thoughtfulness in locking the door, but the inspector also had a key and so thrust upon them an elderly clergyman with cherry cheeks and white hair. He was perturbed at first with the haste of his entrance and mopped his brows, mutely appealing for sympathy from his fellow-travellers. What he read in their faces was not altogether encouraging, and for a time he said nothing but looked out of the window with elaborate unconsciousness. Before the train had crossed the Thames he turned suddenly towards Stephen. "Sorry I intruded. Had no say in the matter, or wouldn't have. Young myself once." He smiled jovially. "Change first stop. Not till Croydon, I'm afraid."

He produced a newspaper without further parley, unfolded it to its widest extent and buried his head within it, ostrich-wise. Stephen and Delia looked at each other with faces that suggested that a large fire was burning somewhere between them. Stephen's anger faded when he saw that his companion was biting her lips to avoid smiling, and they talked upon indifferent subjects until the train slowed down at East

Croydon. The old gentleman arose, took down his bag and departed, first remarking, "Glad to be rid of me. Don't blame you. I was on my own honeymoon once. Wish you the best of luck wherever you go. Hope no more interruptions."

His hopes were fulfilled, thanks to the guard, who, with an eye to the end of their journey, dexterously turned a middle-aged lady of uncompromising aspect and wearing a large black hat with plumes that would not have been out of place on a hearse, into another carriage, despite her angry contention that having paid her fare she had a perfect right to enter wherever she pleased.

"Aren't you going to let me kiss you?" asked Stephen humbly, when the train had gathered speed again.

"Oh, what is the good? It only makes us both miserable. And I have quite made up my mind never to see you again."

"Then—you don't care any more?"

"What difference does it make whether I do or not? I can't go on like this any longer. I can't go on living with him—and—it's wicked. And he is so good."

"But—dearest one——"

"And you don't love me, really, as you ought to, or you couldn't have gone away all that time and left me. I have been so miserable—so very miserable."

"I had to go. You know I couldn't get out of it. I had promised."

"You wouldn't have promised, if you had really loved me. But I am glad you went, because it gave me time to think—how wicked I have been. I can't

go on. I can't go on living with him—when I feel as I do. And pretending. I wish I could die—and then you would forget me. No—you mustn't. I mean it. If we ever do see each other, it will have to be as friends and nothing more."

He protested, argued, entreated; but she remained firm and showed no signs of yielding when at last they reached their destination.

Neither of them had ever been to the place before. The old town lay some little distance from the station, the intervening space nearly overgrown with a parasitical growth of new and hideous red brick villas. They passed an ancient church that stood upon a little hillock at the town's end, walked down the sleepy High Street that widened out, as it approached the church, into a market-place with two old coaching-inns watching each other mistrustfully from either side, and so came into a country road with a large park beside it. They passed an ancient water-mill, with a gate which gave access to a footpath crossing the park. Into this they turned, at random, and followed it up a gentle ascent and through the ancient woods which crowned it, whence they could look back upon the red roofs of the town in the hollow below them, with blue spirals of wood-smoke reaching straight up through the still air above it. The sky, which had been grey and heavy in London, was here a-flicker with pale sunshine; it was ideal winter weather, with a crisp sparkle in the air that might set the heaviest heart a-dancing. It had been freezing over-night, and the brown leaves that still clung to the oak trees were outlined in delicate hoar-frost, while those that were already fallen rustled cheerfully underfoot.

Stephen and Delia kept along the path through the wood until it crossed a wooden paling by a stile, and so came to a breezy upland common, a wilderness of gorse bushes and brisk, brown bracken, with here and there a clump of fir trees or of trembling silver birches. A short half mile, and the ground dropped suddenly in a steep hill side, giving a noble view of blue rolling hills—wooded to their summits—and sheltered valleys basking in the welcome sunshine, stretching far away across the Weald of Kent towards the sea. It was a cheerful landscape, intimate and friendly, with farms and villages scattered among the woodlands, and a blur of smoke from a larger town to the eastward, and a trail of snowy vapour drawn across it where a train sped joyously away from the murk of London.

By good fortune the lovers found a wooden bench that must have been placed there on purpose for such as they, sheltered from observation in a grove of firs, yet open to the sunshine, and giving a clear view of the countryside spread out like a map below them.

“It is very beautiful here,” said Delia. “I am glad our last outing together should be to such a lovely place. It will be something to look back upon.”

“Do you really mean that it is to be the last?”

“What else is to be done? We are only eating our hearts out and running into danger all the time—to no purpose. We only go on—and on—and some day we shall be caught—and for nothing. It isn’t as if——”

She paused, as though afraid of saying too much, and gazed out sadly over the landscape.

“As if—what? Tell me what you were going to say.”

She shook her head.

"Delia—dearest Delia—there are many more beautiful places than this in the world."

"I shall never see them. While—Tooting. Oh, how I hate the place!"

"Why shouldn't you see them?"

She laughed bitterly. "Perhaps, when I am middle-aged and dowdy, with all the life crushed out of me, and he thinks that he has made enough money—perhaps I shall."

"Before then—I mean."

He tried to see her eyes, but they were veiled. He tried to draw her to him, but she resisted.

"Why shouldn't you see them at once?"

"What is the good of talking? You know it is impossible."

"At once. And together."

She looked him full in the eyes now, almost contemptuously. "If you had really wanted—that, you should have asked me before. It is too late now. I see how wicked it would be."

But she allowed herself to be drawn a little closer towards him.

"I——"

"Besides, you would be sorry for it afterwards. You don't care enough for that; or you wouldn't always be thinking about hurting her. In a little time you would get to hate me because I took you away from her. And then——"

"Come with me, Delia. I can't live without you any longer. I have tried to: God knows I have tried. If you love me a thousandth part as much as I love you, come away with me. Let us leave this hateful country,

where there is nothing but misery for both of us. We'll go to Italy, or Spain, or Greece, where there is always sunshine and blue sea; where we shall be able to love each other without having to tremble every time we hear a footstep. We will forget all the rest of the world in our love for each other. I love you so, Delia; darling one—come with me—or I shall die.”

Her head was on his shoulder now, and she nestled in the shelter of his arms. She said very little, but her lips were yet mute witnesses to her consent to anything he might propose. She was smiling, and in her smile there was something of possession, as though she realised how potent was the spell her fresh young beauty had laid upon him. He, for his part, was carried far beyond any thought of the possible consequences of what he proposed; there was no room in heart or brain for anything but the vision of their future rapture in that Southern Nirivana whereof he drew such vivid word-pictures for her encouragement—if that were needed.

She was the first to come back to remembrance of the real world in which they were. “What is the time?” she asked suddenly. He followed her unwillingly back from the land of dreams and looked at his watch. She started to her feet. “We haven't a moment to lose. The train goes at half-past three. And it will take us quite half an hour to get to the station. I daren't possibly miss it. I don't know whatever I shall say as it is.”

“We shall catch it all right. I'm afraid you won't get any lunch, though.” The train was actually starting as they rushed through the booking office on to the platform. They leaped into the first available carriage,

which fortunately proved to be empty, and straight-way relapsed once more into fairyland.

Delia was again the first to awake to the fact that they were returning by a different route to that by which they had come. "That was Tulse Hill," she cried, as they dashed headlong through a station. "We are in the wrong train."

They looked at each other in dismay.

"We must be going to London Bridge. The very last place in the world where I should like to be seen with you."

"We must make the best of it," he urged. "At least, the City people will all be in their offices still when we get there. It will be all right."

"You will have to leave me there. I shall get a hansom and drive to the factory, as if I had come to fetch John. I do, sometimes."

They thought it wiser to make their adieux in the train and leave the station by different exits, but the hazard of the traffic brought them together again on the pavement of the courtyard. "It's all right," she whispered. "There is no one that knows me. We have been frightening ourselves about nothing."

He helped her tenderly into the cab, and stood for a moment bending over the apron as they rehearsed the place and hour of their next meeting. "Don't put your face so close to mine," she remonstrated. "You never know." As she drove away, she looked back at him out of the window and waved her hand. He walked slowly down towards Bridge Street, meaning to return home by the Underground.

Neither of them had noticed the two men who came together out of one of the tea-shops opposite the sta-

tion just as she left him. Nor, indeed, to judge by appearances, were the two men more observant. Mr. Manwell turned, indeed, suddenly pale. Mr. Jennings, who was about to speak, noticed his change of colour. He looked at him again, stealthily; then, as stealthily, at the tall young man on the other side of the road. Both of them began to talk at once, taking up their conversation at the point where they had left it when they rose from the tea-table.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MR. JENNINGS was not a man of literary tastes. To a casual observer there would have appeared something rather surprising, accordingly, in the close intimacy which he struck up with Mr. Manwell after the luncheon party of Lord Mayor's Day. He had met Carrie's betrothed on several previous occasions without showing any desire for his friendship; perhaps because he did not then realise the young man's connection with Stanmores' Bank.

Mr. Jennings, when starting in business on his own account, had applied to his late employers for an introduction to that famous banking house and, rather to his own surprise, had obtained it. He had opened his account with the £2,500 contributed by Mr. Groschen towards their partnership. Of this sum the young German, over-persuaded by the protestations of the shady solicitor who acted for Mr. Jennings that such was the usual custom in this country, had agreed that half should be considered as belonging to his partner, as a set-off against his business experience and connections. Mr. Jennings had seized the opportunity to discharge certain private liabilities; Mr. Groschen had found his first introduction to the social life of London rather expensive; the actual working capital of the firm had thus been reduced, almost at its inception, to a little over £2,000. Thanks, however, to the excellence of his introduction to Stanmores', Mr. Jen-

nings was able to consider this only as a "margin," and to conduct his business as though its actual capital were four times that sum. How this was brought about requires some little explanation. The business of the firm consisted in the importation of the raw material of a staple industry. This was purchased from the foreign shipper by means of bills-of-exchange, payable in sixty days. To these bills-of-exchange, were "attached" the bills-of-lading for the goods, the effect being that Messrs. Jennings and Groschen could obtain delivery from the docks as soon as they paid the amount of the bills-of-exchange, and not before. It was at this point that the introduction to Stanmores' became of use. The bank advanced three-quarters of the amount needed, the firm finding the remainder. The bills-of-exchange paid, the bank received the bills-of-lading for the goods and held them until Jennings and Groschen had resold them and received payment, when it handed over the bills-of-lading to the purchaser, repaid itself the amount of the loan, with the interest which had accrued upon it, and placed the balance to the credit of the firm. It, of course, frequently happened that, owing to the paying off of small balances on previous transactions and similar incidentals, the amount for which the bills-of-exchange were drawn did not tally exactly with the value of the goods they covered. To guard themselves against possible loss, the bank were in the habit of asking to see the invoices rendered by the shippers.

In the beginning all had gone well ; but, after a short time, as Mr. Jennings and Mr. Groschen between them drew out of the business for their private expenses some four times the amount of their profits, their

capital decreased with uncomfortable rapidity. It happened that, in one respect, the partners were extremely well matched. Both were incorrigible optimists, with an infinite capacity for looking on the bright side of things. They were accordingly agreed in their method of estimating their profits, which was somewhat as follows: If, out of a consignment of perhaps a hundred bales, they succeeded in disposing of one at a price which showed a profit of £3, they would argue that their profit on the whole consignment must be £300; for, as they would very shrewdly remark, in their business it was just as easy to sell a hundred bales as to sell one. This argument did not always hold good for a commodity the price of which varied almost from day to day, according to the state of the market, and their optimism forbade them to estimate their losses, actual or possible, in the same liberal spirit. Nevertheless, by valuing their stock at what they considered it ought to fetch rather than at what it had cost, they produced half-yearly balance-sheets which were entirely satisfactory alike to themselves and others who had a right to be interested. As it happened, they had not thought it necessary to mention to their bankers, or to any one else, that of the original £2,500 introduced by Mr. Groschen, but £1,500 was actually his own, the rest having been advanced by his widowed mother, of whose savings it formed the greater part. If, in all this, Mr. Groschen showed a certain lack of common sense and even of honour unusual among those of his nationality, it was rather to be put down to the result of an University education than to any natural lack of wit. For, having for a time undertaken the study of law at the world-famous

University of Kleinstadt, he had there become famous as perennial King of the Kneipp and as the hardest drinker who had ever favoured that seat of learning by his presence. Finding that such dry study as that of law threatened to interfere with his jovial outlook upon life, he had later migrated to Hamburg, where he entered a merchant's office. The merchant, being of an unappreciative temperament, had in due course dispensed with his services, and things might have gone hard with Mr. Groschen had he not, in the nick of time, come into a legacy, with the remains of which he had shaken the dust of Hamburg off his feet and betaken himself to London, attracted chiefly by rumours of the gay life which may be lived, by those who so desire, in the metropolis of the modern world.

Thus, from one cause and another, although the balance-sheets which Mr. Groschen made a habit of voluntarily submitting to his bankers showed most satisfactory results, his actual command of cash became always smaller. In time, Messrs. Stanmore showed signs of over-pertinent curiosity into the reason of this state of things. Mr. Jennings, having received a polite intimation that the introduction of more capital would be held desirable, set his wits to work upon the problem. He finally hit upon the idea of requesting his shippers to forward him duplicate invoices for all they sold him, the one to be calculated upon a price twenty-five per cent. higher than the other. He explained that he was frequently asked by customers to inform them, for their guidance, the original cost of certain goods, and that it was necessary to humour them as far as possible. Thereafter he submitted the higher-priced invoice to the bank, and thus solved the

problem of doing business without any capital whatever. For a short time Fortune smiled upon him, prices rose, and Messrs. Stanmore regarded their clients with a benevolent eye. But these halcyon days soon passed, prices fell as rapidly as they had risen, and Mr. Jennings was driven to sell some of his stock for smaller sums than those he had already borrowed on it.

At the time when the firm moved into its newer and finer offices, their position towards their bankers was already becoming difficult. By the day upon which Stephen helped Delia into the hansom at London Bridge, it was not far short of desperate, and the partners, amiably drinking each other's health in the privacy of their private office, were agreed that it was time something was done. Not, be it said, that Mr. Groschen had any very clear idea of the actual facts of the case, preferring to expend the greater part of his energies in backing horses and entertaining unconventional female friends at his flat in the neighbourhood of St. James' Street, and leaving the conduct of finance to his more experienced partner.

Mr. Jennings had that morning received a polite but urgent request to favour his bankers with a call. Having fortified his nerves with a certain number of whiskys-and-sodas, and subsequently munched as many cloves in order to mask the flavour of his breath, he set out upon his delicate errand—not exactly anxious, for it was not in his nature, but with the conviction that what he pleasantly called “twisting old Stanmore's tail” might prove more difficult than heretofore. His theory of banking gave him some comfort. Could he but succeed in getting “deep enough into their ribs”—that is to say, in owing them enough

money to make his ruin a serious loss to them—they would be forced, in their own interest, to help him through his troubles. And, being accustomed to regard matters with a microscopic or telescopic mental eye, according to his own inclination, he felt moderately confident that they could not afford to go to extremities with him. As it happened, the bank-manager was of another opinion. Severely cross-examined, Mr. Jennings explained one point after another with laborious volubility—it was one of his proudest boasts that he could talk for hours without saying anything—but he did not explain all that was desired of him. The manager, asking him to wait, retired to consult his superior, Sir James Stanmore himself; returned with the ultimatum that, unless Mr. Jennings could see his way to reduce the amount of his indebtedness and to increase the margin of security, by one-half respectively, within a week, they would be forced to put the goods up for sale by public auction and thus safeguard themselves. Mr. Jennings, realising that the result of anything of the kind might prove extremely unpleasant, bowed himself out, volubly explaining that he would do all that was required of him in less than the time mentioned.

As he turned the corner of Gracechurch Street, his optimism for the moment in eclipse, he saw Mr. Manwell walking in front of him. As a drowning man at a straw, so did Mr. Jennings clutch at Mr. Manwell, hoping, he knew not how, that in some way Mr. Manwell's position in the bank might prove of service to him in his extremity. Casting about him for expedients, Mr. Jennings had already marked down John Blacklock as a possible lender of money; and farther,

John Blaicklock's artist friend, Cartmel, who being, as he had heard, engaged to Sir James Stanmore's daughter, might reasonably be expected to have some influence with that autocrat, could he be induced to exercise it.

Mr. Manwell was going across London Bridge to the Southwark Branch of the bank, and proposed to treat himself to a cup of tea on the way. Mr. Jennings, not being anxious to see his partner just then, presupposed a business call in the same neighbourhood and suggested that they should walk together. Thus it came about that, emerging from the tea-shop, both saw Stephen's farewell to Delia. Mr. Jennings, being a plain man, would have found nothing very remarkable in the incident had it not been for its effect upon his companion. Mr. Manwell, on the other hand, being familiar with the inter-sexual conventions of up-to-date romance, at once scented a hundred direly immoral possibilities in the conduct of his fascinating sister-in-law-to-be, the more so that her companion was the one man in the world for whom Mr. Manwell had conceived the most jealous dislike. At the same time, he had no desire to take Mr. Jennings into his confidence, nor, gazing at him askance, could he see anything unusual in the expression of his staring blue eyes and russet cheeks. But Mr. Jennings had already seen all that he needed to see, and, long years of commercial travelling having made him a keen reader of expression, thus had certain ideas presented to him, which grew into a chain of thought—whether the incident might not be made to serve in averting his own impending doom.

Neither had any further desire to be together, and

parted company as soon as they conveniently could. Mr. Manwell went moodily back to the bank; Mr. Jennings turned into a favourite wineshop and treated himself to a glass of port as quickening the imagination, after which he returned to his office in good spirits, to explain to his anxious partner that everything was going as favourably as possible, and that he had twisted old Stanmore's tail once more.

Having attained to the dignity of being senior partner, Mr. Jennings rarely arrived at his office before midday. He had for many years had an inveterate prejudice against early rising, which he would humorously defend on the grounds that you run the risk of catching cold if you are about before the day is properly aired. Yet upon the morning following the incident at London Bridge, he was early astir, and by ten o'clock had taken up a strategic position behind the brown gauze blind of the saloon-bar in the Wheatsheaf. The Wheatsheaf was in the High Road, immediately facing Brabazon Road, and thus commanding a full view of everybody who entered or left any of the houses therein. The time passed pleasantly enough for the patient watcher—if anything, he was a little disappointed that Delia appeared so soon. He had not, in fact, been waiting more than twenty minutes when she left "The Laurels" and came hurriedly towards his point of vantage. Evidently she was late for some appointment. Mr. Jennings leisurely prepared to follow. Several trams passed her, but all were full and she was forced to walk the whole way to Balham Station. Mr. Jennings, cautiously following, managed to leap unobserved into the same train and in due time saw her enter Stephen's studio. Mr. Jennings was in luck's

way. The Rodney Arms, at the corner of Rodney Street, gave an uninterrupted view of the studios, and misled by this and by the fact that he could there obtain his favourite blend of whisky, Mr. Jennings would have missed his quarry altogether, had he not suddenly remembered an important business appointment in the City.

He did not expect that Mrs. Blacklock would leave the studio for some time—he was not altogether certain, indeed, whether it was worth while waiting about on the offchance: at least he would have ample time to wire to his partner to keep the business appointment in his stead. Asking for the nearest telegraph office, he learned that it was but a short distance along the main road. He set out and despatched his message, alleging his wife's sudden indisposition as the cause of his absence; for Mr. Groschen, though regally disregarding of the larger interests of his business, had yet a Teutonic care for the smaller punctilios. Mr. Jennings was strolling leisurely back to the Rodney Arms when, a little distance from him, on the other side of the way, he observed Stephen, with Delia beside him, in the act of hailing a cab. They had decided to make an expedition to Hampton Court, being tempted by the fineness of the weather. They had come out by the back passage way, and, had Mr. Jennings been watching the front door, he must inevitably have missed them. He effaced himself successfully and followed in another cab. His luck held good during the rest of the day, which he spent pleasantly, dogging the footsteps of the unconscious lovers, never losing sight of them until they parted at Vauxhall Station, late in the afternoon. After which Mr. Jennings returned home,

feeling satisfied that he had done a good day's work towards setting his affairs with Stanmores' Bank upon a more satisfactory footing.

Curiously enough, when he dropped in at the Blacklocks' that evening for a smoke and a chat, he found that Mr. Manwell was there before him, looking more miserable than ever and keeping his eye upon Delia as upon a lode-star. Mr. Jennings, for his part, was in the best of spirits, boasting about the splendid business he was doing, telling interminable stories to his own satisfaction, making himself as agreeable, in a word, as was customary. He inquired after the progress of Delia's portrait; learned that it was now practically finished, although Mr. Cartmel's recent absence abroad had delayed its progress; that Delia had that morning been for what was expected to be the last, but had proved to be the penultimate sitting; that she had afterwards lunched with a lady-friend in South Kensington, and had spent the afternoon shopping in the West End.

He did not stay late, explaining that he had promised to be home in good time in deference to his wife's delicate state of health. He there smoked four pipes while determining his future plan of campaign, retiring to bed shortly after midnight with pleasant anticipations for the morrow.

Mr. Manwell left soon after him, though not before Delia had yawned several times convincingly. Carrie declared that he must be ill, for she had never before known him to be so persistently gloomy. Delia suggested that he had been getting himself into some scrape, but could not bring himself to confess it. John laughingly agreed with his wife's diagnosis and Carrie,

though dutifully combating it, was secretly convinced—the more so that, when parting from her at the front door, Mr. Manwell had enjoined her in solemn tones to meet him without fail at lunch next day, when he had something of the utmost importance to say to her.

Unlike Mr. Jennings, the young man's dreams were not of the most pleasant. Thus, while virtuously denouncing Cartmel as a monster of moral depravity, he would see that gentleman turn suddenly into a serpent of malignant aspect, occasionally, though not invariably, having a head with the features of Delia, which would advance upon him with terrible swiftness, so that in the effort to escape he would wake up with a violent start. So little refreshment did he obtain from his slumbers that his fellow-clerks at the bank were next morning moved to unkind suggestions that he must have had a fair old beano overnight, and Carrie, as he approached the marble-topped table at which she was consuming her daily lunch of a bun and a glass of milk, was convinced from his aspect that he must have been doing something very reprehensible indeed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

STEPHEN was in one of those intervals of comparative calm which come between tempestuous mental crises. He had so whipped his conscience that for the moment it had grown callous. He felt that the whole imbroglio of his affairs had gone beyond his powers of direction; Fate had definitely proved too strong for him. His own intentions had all along been excellent: upon the shoulders of Fate he laid all responsibility for the future. Things must settle themselves soon in one way or the other. Claire had written to him that her father now consented to a provisional date for their wedding, and herself suggested that it should take place upon the Thursday after Easter, the day upon which her mother had been married. By that date, then, his troubles would be over; if he married Claire it meant the breaking off of all relations with Delia; if he eloped with Delia he certainly could not marry Claire. Fate had thus a couple of months in which to make up its mind. If it wanted him to elope it must provide him with money for the purpose. Delia's desire was to make for one of the Greek islands which he had described with such dangerous enthusiasm, to settle there and there to forget the world. The idea was fascinating; he desired nothing so much as to forget things, especially in Delia's company, even although it would mean his social and professional ruin. For the moment, though, he was quite without the means

for any such adventure. He had been spending much and making little recently; he had not had the courage to look into the exact condition of his affairs; he had a lot of money coming in from various sources before very long; until it came, such expense as a double ticket to the Isles of Greece was out of the question. So much was certain; everything else was in the lap of the gods.

For the moment he felt almost cheerful; all was well; there was no chance of discovery; Delia—that she should be in such a hurry to be gone was one of the flies in his ointment—had made up her mind that she would not see him for a week, in order that they might both give all their energies to making preparations for the elopement. At their next meeting the portrait, which could not with any decency be kept unfinished, was to be formally and officially completed, and Stephen was giving a tea-party in honour of the event, Delia having been long desirous of meeting some of his more distinguished acquaintances in the flesh. To his own mind there was something almost indecent in such a function, if they were actually going to elope so shortly after it; but it could scarcely add much to what people would say of him in any case. He was tired—tired to death; for this one week he meant to take things easily and not to worry.

An unfamiliar knock came at the door. At once his forced repose gave way to the liveliest apprehension. Who could it be at that hour of the morning? It was not Delia—she had a secret way of knocking, a kind of amatory Morse Code by which she explained that she loved him even before they saw each other. Could it be—had Blacklock discovered something—and come

to reproach him with his perfidy? He couldn't stand that. Could it be Claire—come back in hot haste—because news of his escapades had somehow penetrated to Cannes? That would be worst of all.

He opened the door himself with an admirable affectation of composure. It was Mr. Jennings—he remembered him well—Mr. Jennings, rather ill at ease, smiling and bowing with the deferential loin-hinge action peculiar to him. What the devil could he want? How did he know where——? But of course he must have got the address from Blacklock. Mr. Jennings did not seem to want anything. He had been making an early business-call in the neighbourhood, and, remembering Mr. Cartmel's kind invitation to drop in and see his pictures when passing—Mr. Cartmel had quite forgotten it—had thought he would take him at his word.

Stephen's relief found expression in amiability. He welcomed his visitor with all due warmth and gave him the most comfortable chair. Mr. Jennings sat on its extreme edge, holding his hat, umbrella, and crumpled gloves awkwardly in his hands. In answer to Stephen's query, he replied that he had long since breakfasted—they kept early hours in the City—but he never refused a good offer; and he could do with just a spot, though it was rather early in the day, as indeed it was, being not yet eleven.

Stephen was considering how he could best word a civil hint that he had much to do—a problem which his native dislike of hurting people's feelings always made extremely difficult of solution—when Mr. Jennings at last found his opportunity. It came in Stephen's inquiry how he found business. Things were

quiet—very quiet, just now, he explained—his busy season did not begin for another month or so. Money was tight, the bank rate had gone up again. Thus he came gradually to his reason—one of his reasons, he put it—for intruding. He understood—Mr. Blacklock, their mutual friend and one of the best—had mentioned that Mr. Cartmel was engaged to the daughter of Sir James Stanmore. Mr. Cartmel admitted, shortly, that such was the case. It was a pleasant coincidence, went on Mr. Jennings, that his firm banked with Stanmores'. He hoped that Mr. Cartmel would not think he was taking a liberty if, in fact, he asked a favour. Stephen, with an inkling of what was to come, yet said that he should be very pleased to grant it, if within his power. Mr. Jennings thanked him effusively. As he had already pointed out, things were quiet just now, money was tight, the firm of Jennings and Groschen held a very large stock. It was excellent holding; when the time came to realise there would be a fortune in it, but that time was not yet. As it perversely happened, the bank had taken it into its head to come down on them just at this most particularly inconvenient time. A fortnight earlier—or a month later—it were of no consequence; but just at the moment, until the firm had time to turn things round, it was, in a word, the very dickens. Mr. Cartmel's position would naturally give him influence with Sir James. If he would be so very kind as to exert it—not asking anything out of the way, merely that Sir James would hold his hand for a time—the firm and its partners could never be sufficiently grateful. In any case he hoped Mr. Cartmel would excuse the liberty. At this point Mr. Jennings wound himself up in a network of figures and ex-

planations, quite unintelligible to his audience, but all professing to prove that Messrs. Jennings and Groschen were, on the whole, in rather a sounder financial position than the Bank of England, given only the time to turn round. He produced a budget of neatly written documents, which he declared put the whole position in a nutshell, and entreated Stephen to peruse them at his leisure.

For once in a way Stephen felt that he must put his foot down heavily. The idea that he should interfere with Sir James' conduct of his business was in itself so ludicrous that he would have laughed had he not been indignant with the impudence of it. He explained, courteously but firmly, that, much as he would like to do anything in his power for Mr. Jennings, such a thing was altogether out of the question. Even were he to do so, he must assure him that his influence did not penetrate nearly so far east as Lombard Street, and that Sir James would only regard his interference as impertinent. He was very sorry indeed—he could scarcely say how sorry—and, of course, he was not in the least offended, rather complimented by Mr. Jennings' confidence. But, in a word, it was impossible. And wouldn't Mr. Jennings have another drink?

Mr. Jennings had another drink. He took his rebuff admirably, and was not in the least cast down. He thanked Mr. Cartmel from the bottom of his heart; he took it extremely friendly of him to be so frank and considerate. He would certainly not forget his kindness in a hurry. And—Here was luck!

Stephen expected that his visitor would now go without more ado; but Mr. Jennings seemed in no hurry to depart. He drank his whisky with unusual slowness;

he talked upon indifferent subjects with unflagging volubility. So, in time, he came to his second point.

"Yes, Mr. Cartmel, you ought to have been in the City. A business life would suit you down to the ground, though I say it. It isn't as if it was all office-work, just sitting in a chair and writing letters. It means a lot of getting about—and seeing things."

Stephen was sure that it must be both healthy and enjoyable.

"That it is, Mr. Cartmel. Take me, now. In the last three days my business-calls have taken me to places as far apart as, let me see, London Bridge. And, where was it yesterday?—yes, Hampton Court, of all places. And now, to-day, Chelsea."

He finished his tumbler with an air of leisurely contemplation.

Stephen poked the fire.

"Yes, Mr. Cartmel, it's a splendid life, being in business. Plenty of getting about and seeing things. It's quite surprising what a lot of things you do see, too, if you keep your eyes open."

"Things?"

"Queer things. Interesting things. Useful things, sometimes."

He looked round the room approvingly. "Of course, it isn't every one who knows how to make use of the things he sees. But you generally can if you have your head screwed on the right way and know how to put two and two together."

He rose to his feet.

"Well, I must be going. I'm afraid I've taken up a lot of your time, Mr. Cartmel. Good-day, and thank you for all your kindness."

Stephen preceded him to the door, and there was no opportunity to shake hands.

"You'll excuse the liberty of my having asked you, Mr. Cartmel. And—I suppose—you couldn't possibly see your way to change your mind? It would mean a lot to me. Just time to turn some of our stock over is all we want. I should take it very kindly of you if you would. And if there was ever any little thing I could do for you in return, you would only have to mention it."

"I have already told you that it wouldn't be the slightest good."

"But if you could only see your way to try, Mr. Cartmel."

"I don't know. I can't promise anything. I must think about it."

There was a jaunty cock in Mr. Jennings' hat as he turned into the King's Road, and as he leaped upon an eastward-bound 'bus he smiled so widely that the conductor felt anxiously at his collar, lest there should be anything ridiculous in his appearance.

It was some hours later that Mr. Manwell, returning from his lunch, ran suddenly against Mr. Jennings at the corner of Lombard Street. Mr. Jennings was standing with his thumbs inserted into the armholes of his waistcoat, gazing down the street at the tall black building of Stanmores' Bank with an affectionate smile.

Mr. Manwell was not in a cheerful mood. He had just left the scene of a violent quarrel with his betrothed, in which the fault was entirely on his side. For no young lady, having been urged to become the depository of a dark secret, likes to be put off, when

it comes to the point, with sighs, stammerings, and a final refusal to go into the matter at all. Carrie's indignation had been instant and terrible. She had given her imagination full play, and had goaded him with every possible and impossible crime from drunkenness to vulgar intrigue. So desperate had Mr. Manwell become under the lashings of her tongue, that he had at last rushed out of the tea-shop, leaving her to pay for his lunch as well as her own, and exciting dark suspicions in the attendants by the rapidity of his flight. He was still, as it were, making for safety, when he ran against Mr. Jennings. That gentleman being temporarily unsteady on his legs, clutched at his assailant for support and was on the point of telling him what he thought about him. Even when he became aware of his identity, his grasp, though it altered somewhat in character, lost nothing in determination. Mr. Manwell, who did not feel his nerves equal to another scene, submitted passively. Mr. Jennings assumed an air of mystery and nodded darkly towards Stanmores' Bank.

"See that building?" he inquired darkly.

"The bank, do you mean?"

"I've bought it." He winked with solemn gravity. "Bought and paid for. What do you say to that?"

Mr. Manwell thought it safer to say nothing.

"B'longs to me, as you might say." He winked again as gravely as before and staggered slightly. "Been toasting my luck round the corner. Come and have a tiddler with me."

"Thanks, very much. It's very good of you; but I'm afraid I must get back to the office."

"Do anything for me, they would. Len' me a million if I wanted it. Without documents. Daren't refuse."

Mr. Manwell wondered whether it would be safe to knock him down. He decided against the scheme.

"Indeed?" he faltered.

"Know too much. Under my thumb—f'you see what I mean. 'F ol' Whiskers knew all I know."

Mr. Manwell started. "What's that?"

"Don' you be 'fraid. I shan' say nothin'—not s'long 's I'm treated like gen'leman. Un'er my thumb. See what I mean?"

"Who is? I—I don't understand."

"He's all ri'. Ol' Whiskers. Goin' to be married. In my pocket—'s you might say. But—bless you—safe as houses with me. I talk a lot, but I don' say much. See what I mean?"

He leant back to observe the effects of his words, thus giving his victim the opportunity of escape. Mr. Manwell did practically no work that afternoon, and sighed so frequently that his colleagues decided he must be in love.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE possession of a guilty conscience has its drawbacks; at least it makes towards quickening of the wits. Under ordinary circumstances Delia might have thought little of Mr. Manwell's strange behaviour. As things were, her senses were always on the alert to close up avenues of discovery, and one of the possible combinations of adverse circumstances which she had considered, was that Mr. Manwell, being in the City, might in some way have there seen Stephen and herself. In her head she felt perfectly certain that he had not; in her imagination she felt that anything was possible. When Carrie mentioned the young man's mysterious injunction, Delia at once leapt to the conclusion that danger threatened. It might be only a false alarm, but she felt it safer to mention casually to her husband that she had met Mr. Cartmel in the City when on her way to call at the factory, but had, in the excitement of catching their train home, forgotten to mention it. She did it artistically, while John was shaving—so artistically, indeed, that a more suspicious man must have observed it. Her husband only gazed over his entrenchment of lather with the smile which always greeted the mention of Stephen's name, and reproached her for not having brought him along to Milk Street.

Delia's precautions only served to whet her own anxiety. In the course of the morning she evolved a

new and alarming idea. What if John should happen to meet Stephen during the day, and Stephen should deny having been at London Bridge at all? Such a discrepancy must make even John prick up his ears. She wrote a hasty note of warning, expressed it to Rodney Street, and spent the rest of the morning in an agony of doubt whether it had arrived in time. Her fears were not allayed until after lunch, when Stephen rang her up on the telephone, telling her that all was well. Had she said anything about Hampton Court? he asked. She had not—feeling quite certain that Mr. Manwell could under no circumstances have left his work to go so far afield. "That's a pity," she heard Stephen say to himself. Before she could ask why, the exchange-clerk cut them off in the arbitrary fashion of her kind, and, not knowing from what office Stephen was speaking, Delia could not pursue the subject.

She now felt convinced that Fortune had again proved kind, and so remained even when Mr. Manwell called and asked for her some half-hour before the usual time of John's return. He looked pale and haggard, at which she smiled in secret, jumping to the conclusion that Carrie had been angered by his confession, whatever it might have been, and that he had now come to appeal for her own benevolent intervention.

He did not look Delia in the face nor offer her his pink knuckles in greeting as usual. He remained standing awkwardly in the middle of the carpet. She could see that he was genuinely unhappy about something, but mixed with his grief, was also a suggestion of importance which gave to his woe-begone features a new meaning.

"Carrie isn't back yet," said Delia, anxious to get

straight to the point. "I don't expect her for another hour."

"I don't want to see Carrie. I want to speak to you. That's why I came early. Before they get back."

It flashed across Delia's mind that he might have come to make her the offer of his affections; for it was perfectly well understood in the family that he worshipped her from afar, though hitherto in the most proper spirit. There was even a floating suspicion which had, for obvious reasons, never found utterance in words, that he had only become engaged to Carrie as being, if not the rose, at least near it. Delia dismissed the fantastic idea; there was no suggestion of any such reprehensible intention in the young man's face.

"You want to speak to me?" she asked tolerantly. "Well—what is it about?" It was some time before he made up his mind to speak, and when he did, he quite forgot his carefully prepared exordium.

"Oh, Mrs. Blacklock," he burst out, "I want to ask you—to implore you to stop—before it is too late."

Delia turned very red—with annoyance—with some satisfaction too, at her own foresight.

"What in the world do you mean?"

"Oh, Mrs. Blacklock, I beg you—I'm sure you are acting only in innocent thoughtlessness." He brought this out with some satisfaction, for it was one of the phrases which he had elaborated beforehand. "But think where it is leading you."

"You are exceedingly impertinent. I haven't the vaguest idea what you are talking about."

"Remember what Bernard Shaw says in 'Cashel Byron's Profession.'"

"I don't in the least want to know what Mr. Shaw says—or any one else." She was about to order him from the room, when it occurred to her, with a sickening sense of dread, that he might conceivably have been at Hampton Court, after all. "If you have anything you want to say, please say it. I have several things to attend to."

"You force me to—to—appear brutal. But it is only to save you from—from the arts of a designing scoundrel. This intrigue—with that man——"

"How dare you!" Delia was magnificent in her outraged dignity. "Leave the room at once. At once, I say!"

"I—I am sorry if——"

"Or I shall."

"You shall listen to me. I beg you, once more, to pause before it is too late. I—I speak only for your own good. Give him up. Oh, Mrs. Blaicklock, remember your duty to your husband. I know all."

There was no apprehension in Delia's laugh. "Perhaps you will be good enough to say what all is."

"I saw you together. At London Bridge. He was helping you into a cab. I saw your faces. And it is my duty to appeal to you."

Delia suppressed a sigh of relief.

"Have you finished?"

The scornfulness of her laugh lashed him to sudden fury. To be laughed at by the person whose soul you are intent on saving is galling even to the best-intentioned.

"No, Mrs. Blaicklock, I have not finished. I solemnly beg and implore you to give up this man. I do not know how far this liaison has gone. I don't want

to know. But it must stop—at once. I say it must not go on. Or, if you refuse——”

He paused, to give more weight to the implication.

“Pray go on.”

“Then it will be my duty—a very painful one—as one who is going to become a relation—to lay all the facts before your husband. As the only way of saving you from your mad infatuation. I have had my suspicions, from the very first. I——”

Delia cut him short by rising and going to the door. He thought she meant to leave the room, possibly to repent in the solitude of her own chamber. He was not quite sure what his next step ought to be in that case. To his infinite surprise she locked the door, put the key into her pocket, and returned to her chair.

“You will find a book on that table in the corner. In any case I don’t suppose you will have to wait long.”

“What—what do you mean?”

“I only want to be sure that you do repeat your—your malignant accusation before my husband. I shall be curious to see how he takes it.”

“I—I don’t want to have to do that. You know that I would—that I don’t want to do anything that would do you harm. It is only——”

She had begun to arrange some yellow chrysanthemums in the art-vases on the mantelpiece, and took no further notice of him. He stood as though he had been rooted to the carpet, a prey to the smallest forebodings.

Within ten minutes the garden gate clicked, the latch-key turned in its accustomed lock, and the voice of John made itself heard, calling cheerily for Delia.

She had already unlocked the door. “Would you mind coming in here for a moment, John? Is Carrie

with you? Perhaps she had better come too. Mr. Manwell has something he wants to say to you."

John did as he was bid, his forehead wrinkling in his perplexity at the tone of Delia's voice. Carrie followed, looking more than a little scared; perhaps because she feared that Mr. Manwell's confession had proved more serious than she had in her heart believed.

"Will you say what you want to say, Mr. Manwell?" said Delia in her iciest manner, when they had entered.

"This—this is hardly fair of you, Mrs. Blaicklock," murmured her unhappy accuser.

"What in the world is the meaning of all this?" asked John, not knowing where he was expected to laugh—if at all. "Is it a joke—or what?"

"Not at all. Mr. Manwell thinks that it is his duty, as my future brother-in-law—that is why I thought Carrie had better come in as well—to complain of my conduct. He came here to-night to insist that I should reform. As I couldn't promise to do anything of the sort, he said he should have to speak to you about it. I thought it better to get it over at once, so I prevailed upon him to wait until you came in. Isn't that so, Mr. Manwell?"

"You aren't in earnest, dearest? What do you mean?"

"Mr. Manwell can tell you better than I can. You had better ask him."

Her husband's face darkened. "Now, Manwell, what is all this?"

"I refuse to answer you. This isn't fair. I——"

"If he won't tell you, I must try to do it myself. He professes to believe that I am in love with Mr.

Cartmel, and that I am carrying on a disgraceful intrigue with him."

"What!"

"He saw us together—at London Bridge Station, didn't you say?—when was it?—the day before yesterday, I think."

"You need not say any more, dearest. Now, then, you, Manwell, what do you mean?"

"You put me in a very painful position. I never meant to tell you really. It was only to save her from him. They were together. He—that man Cartmel—was putting her into a hansom."

"Go on. What else?"

John's voice was alarmingly under control.

"There was somebody else saw them——" He was about to mention Mr. Jennings, but thought better of it.

"Oh, there was somebody else, was there? And you—you dared—to bandy my wife's name——"

"No, no, you don't understand. I never mentioned it. Not to a soul. I wouldn't think of such a thing. It was the way they looked at each other as they said good-bye. I had suspected——"

"You contemptible little prurient-minded scoundrel. And you dare—you dare——" Feeling Delia's hand upon his coat sleeve he restrained himself with an effort. "I beg your pardon, dearest, for listening so long to this fellow. Listen to me—you, sir. I knew perfectly well that Mr. Cartmel was with my wife at the time you speak of."

Mr. Manwell's jaw dropped. "You—did?"

"It was with my full consent and approbation. Mr. Cartmel is my dearest friend and my wife's dearest

friend, and it is by my express wish that——But I am insulting both of them by saying so much to you. If I ever again hear——”

“It doesn’t sound much, as I tell it. But you didn’t see them as I did. If you had——”

“Hold your blasted tongue! And get out! At once, I tell you!”

The contrast between the two faces was striking. The effort at self-control had suffused Blaicklock’s with a crimson flush. Manwell, on the other hand, was pale almost to ghastliness, and a yellow light burnt in his eyes. Yet he was not cowed; rather beside himself with shame and baffled anger.

“I tell you, you are blind. He was just going to kiss her. You are only playing into their hands, keeping your eyes shut like this. No, I see what it is; you are trying to shield her. I have got a witness to——”

“Unless—you—go—at—once—I—swear—to—God—I—will—kill—you. And never dare to darken my door again. My God, will you go!”

Even his semi-frenzied state of mind could not conceal from Mr. Manwell that no more was left for him to say.

“Just a moment, John.” There was not a tremor in Carrie’s voice. “Before Mr. Manwell goes, I wish to tell him that if he ever ventures to speak to me again, I shall call a policeman and give him in charge.” She drew a ring from her left hand. “There is your ring. I will send you back your letters and presents to-night.”

She turned her back upon him and embraced Delia.

Mr. Manwell went.

“I beg your pardon, dearest, a-hundred times,” said John Blaicklock. “I thought it better to dispose of it

at once. Why, he must have taken leave of his senses. He must have got his head turned by reading trashy novels. Kiss me, little woman."

Delia felt bitterly remorseful as she kissed him dutifully on the forehead. Her eyes filled with a sudden gush of tears. There was a moment when she was on the point of herself precipitating the catastrophe she had just evaded.

"John."

"My dearest child, it has quite upset you. And I don't wonder. We won't ever mention the subject again."

"But, John."

"Please, Delia, don't make me unhappy by thinking any more about it. What have we got for supper?" He rubbed his hands together with an assumption of jovial greed. "I'm as hungry as a hunter. And that reminds me that I've brought you half a Wensleydale."

"Oh, John, how sweet of you! It's the one cheese I really care for."

Even Carrie, who was most deserving of pity, showed herself much less perturbed than might have been expected.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WITH the best intentions in the world, Claire Stanmore could not feel such unmitigated grief at the news of her Uncle William's serious illness as she knew she ought to. Yet he was her father's only brother, and had been to her the most ideal of bachelor-uncles from her earliest childhood. Stephen Cartmel, on the other hand, though he had only met the old gentleman five or six times in his life and had not found him over and above interesting, received the news of his illness as one of the most unfortunate things that could possibly have happened at that particular moment. William Stanmore, being hypochondriacal and a sentimentalist, firmly believed that he was going to die, and sent despairing messages asking to see his beloved niece before he did so. Claire did not believe that he was going to die; there had been so many false alarms on the subject already; but she was perfectly ready to return to England at once.

Thus it was that on the morning after Mr. Jennings' visit, Stephen was startled by the news that Claire and her stepmother were arriving at Victoria that very evening. Nothing could have been more untimely. Given another week he might have been able to do something: settle with this accursed blackmailer, break with Delia, for there was now really no alternative. He could not elope with her, for lack of means; any more secret meetings with her in London were out of

the question. But to give her up now that things had gone so far would break her heart, to say nothing of his own; probably it would drive her into a fit of remorse, in which she would confess everything to her husband. Claire would inevitably get to hear something about it. Whatever he did, he could expect nothing but disaster.

He was still meditating over Claire's letter, when Bodman entered, in light attire and with a slice of bread and butter, half-consumed, in his hand. "Do you happen to have four-and-six about you? My abominable laundry won't give my shirts up unless I pay the bill for them. Must have had you for a customer, I should think. And until I get a cheque changed I haven't got a penny piece. You're up early this morning. I say, old man, is anything wrong? You haven't had any bad news?"

Five minutes later he returned, having redeemed his linen. He bore a coffee-cup in one hand and a little pile of bread and butter in the other. "Going to finish my breakfast in here," he announced.

"If you had any sense you'd wait till Adam brings mine in. Won't be for half an hour yet, though."

"That's all right. I shall be able to manage another by that time. Now, then, what's wrong?"

"Nothing whatever. What should there be wrong? I'm only a bit worried over money matters. Nothing new in that, is there?"

"You oughtn't to be worried about money, though. You make plenty. What do you do with it all?"

"Lord knows. I don't. Let's change the subject."

Bodman was already enjoying his second breakfast

when Stephen, having steered the conversation in the right direction, found his opportunity.

"Ever been blackmailed, Boddy?" he inquired carelessly.

"I pity the poor devil that tried to bleed me. I'd willingly go halves in what he made out of it."

"But, seriously, if any one tried it on, what would you do?"

"Punch his head, I should say. Or give him in charge."

"Excellent in theory. But in practice he might know too much."

"That's what he trades on. Best plan is not to have anything for him to know."

"You mightn't always be able to help it. Might be some one else's secret. A woman's, say. What would you do then?"

Bodman, munching, looked up at him curiously.

"Own up, I think."

"Own up?"

"To her husband. Or make her."

"Mightn't have one."

"Then I should marry her. And put it right that way."

"You're an ass, Boddy."

He pursued the subject no farther, but turned to consider the inequalities of criminal law, as between rich and poor.

"Heard from Miss Stanmore recently?" said Bodman, rising to return to his work.

"Had a letter this morning. She's coming back to-night."

"Good thing, too."

"Eh? What's that?"

"I said, good thing, too."

"Naturally."

"I say, Stephen. You take my advice and talk it over with her."

"What the devil—— If you take mine, Bodman——"

"I'll clear out. Yes, I'm going. But you'd ever so much better."

Stephen spent some time trying to persuade himself that he could discover no meaning in Bodman's cryptic utterances. At last, feeling that he should choke if he remained indoors, he started out. He had no idea where he was going, but he could not remain, inactive, in that cursed studio. A motor-bus passed him; he boarded it, and paid the fare to the terminus. He must find some district that was unconnected in his thoughts with either Claire or Delia. In his own part of London there was hardly a street along which he could walk without torturing recollections of having at some time been there in the company of one or other of them. He must get away from all such influences. He must think the thing out, fairly and squarely.

Having twice changed his conveyance, almost at random, he found himself at last somewhere in North-east London. The 'bus turned out of a main road, by the side of a public house, and there came to a stop. Stephen descended and continued along the narrow side-street before him. It led him into a maze of other narrow little streets lined with little brown houses of two storeys, that might have passed for dirty card-board boxes had they been neater. It was a district of

dire poverty—even the public houses which stood like sentries at the corners of every street were small and dingy, with nothing of the flashy pretensions of the gin-palace. A thin brown mist, that seemed native to the locality, hung about it, making it, if possible, more depressing, and the air was filled with the reek of coal-smoke and of frying fish. After perhaps half an hour of aimless wandering, turning to the right or left as circumstances required or fancy dictated, Stephen emerged into a broad main thoroughfare along which trams and 'buses were passing. As one drew abreast of him, he found that it plied between Stamford Hill and the City, but he had lost all sense of the direction of either. Turning to his left he pushed briskly on, past long terraces of dingy shops, wherein cheap tailors seemed alone to flourish. The character of the road changed slowly, as he progressed: private houses, as dingy as the shops, dividing the terraces—old houses, most of them, with gardens in front and a generally apologetic suggestion, as though they recognised that they only lingered there on sufferance. The little brown streets that ran off to left and right grew less brown—turned to darker and so to lighter grey, the houses in them added a storey to their stature and threw out bow-windows on the ground floor. Churches and chapels became almost as frequent as the public-houses, and vied with them in adding architectural variety to the main road; the private houses grew less shame-faced, and in some of the front gardens there were trees that looked as if they might bear leaves in summer.

Stephen persevered—dimly noting all he passed and forgetting it the next moment as though it had never

existed—until he came to a large church, standing a little back from the road in a weedy churchyard. It was a hideous erection in stucco, in the neo-classical style of the mid-nineteenth century, with an excrescence stretching skywards that might be termed a tower or a dome according to the observer's taste. Beyond it was a street with a vision of bare branches, down which Stephen turned. The houses were large and must have been formerly inhabited by people of some means, but now were split up among several families—you could tell how many by the different patterns of the window-curtains. The street led across a railway-bridge and passed a station that looked as if it had been dropped there by accident and found its position uncomfortable. Stephen soon tired of it, turned from it to the right, turned again to the left, sometimes plunging into a waste of slums, sometimes emerging into a street of shabby "villa-residences." So, in the end, he came unexpectedly upon an open space, grey and bleak enough, but with potentialities when summer should come. Larger houses than any he had yet seen and with more pretentious gardens, overlooked it. It could boast of a band-stand and a fountain and some flower-beds and some avenues of trees. He asked a passer-by his whereabouts, and learned that he was come to Hackney Downs. He felt disappointed. The name was familiar to him, and upon it he had erected a vision of a wild, bare, rather savage spot, overgrown with brambles, solitary and apart, where you might stand and look down upon the spires of London. It was not the first time that his imagination had proved similarly unreliable; he had felt the same disappointment when he first saw Peckham Rye, for

instance, and the Isle of Dogs and Newington Butts. He was still considering the phenomenon when he came to his sudden resolution. He would confess everything to Claire—keeping nothing back—and leave her to decide. If she was furious and refused him forgiveness, she would herself push him back into the abyss, and Delia with him. If she really loved him—he assumed for the moment, quite against his own convictions, that it was doubtful—she would save him.

He walked rapidly across the Downs, full of his new purpose. He no longer dreaded the hour of Claire's return; he would have wished to see her at once, while his enthusiasm was still hot within him, to get his confession over and feel his conscience clear once more.

A bold plunge through a slum district brought him to another main road. It was narrow, scarcely allowing room for its double row of tram-lines, and still preserved something of the air of an ancient village High Street, lined with old houses and with a venerable church tower overhanging it. A few hundred yards further it passed under a railway bridge and lost its old-world character as by enchantment. It became, instead, straight as a ruler, and double its former width. It was lined with hideous new buildings of the red-brick jerry-built order of architecture, nearly all of them given over to the sale of furniture on the hire-system. There were many rival establishments, each of them clamouring in huge signs and posters that it was the only original firm, the only genuine, the cheapest, the most honourable in its dealings. The whole thoroughfare, in a word, now formed a conspicuous testimony to the march of progress and the blessings of modern innovation. Seeking about him for a means

238 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

of escape, Stephen came at last to where a horse-tram was patiently effacing itself at the corner of a side-street, as though it felt itself a relic of the past and was properly ashamed of it. Its destination proved to be the "Angel" at Islington, which Stephen remembered dimly as being somewhere on the outskirts of civilisation. He boarded it, and in due course progressed solemnly homewards. His mind was now at rest; he felt happier than had been the case for weeks; he looked about him with his old interest in life. At Islington he found that he could travel on by electric-car to Aldwych. He had never yet explored the shallow-surface system and seized the opportunity with the cheerful eagerness of a boy adventuring towards the unknown. He could afford to feel boyish again—now that his troubles were so nearly at an end. Only one thing was wanting to his complete happiness—he had still more than four hours to endure before Claire's train was due at Victoria.

As he made his way along the Strand towards his club, a woman in faded finery came from a public-house and leered at him. He almost shuddered as he passed her. There was a horrible resemblance—a travesty——. Thank God, he was saved from the possibility of——. If only Claire would come—quicker. He wanted to unburden his soul—to realise his new content to the full.

It seemed to him, sitting waiting in the club smoking-room, as if the evening would never come: A great fire was blazing, and grouped around it a number of old gentlemen were sweetly sleeping off the effects of their lunch. If only he could sleep as they did! He read all the morning papers; he ordered tea, and

grumbled secretly at the waiter for bringing it so quickly. As a rule, the service in the smoke-room was execrable; to-day, because he was not in a hurry, his tray was brought almost before the order was out of his mouth. He lingered over his muffin; he read the evening papers; he sought unsuccessfully for a man to talk to; he wrote letters, inventing reasons to himself for writing them. And still it was only six o'clock.

He went out again; walked by a roundabout route to the Black Cat Club; inquired for Mr. Skillet. Mr. Skillet had not been seen there since the night of the "Caterwaulk." He bethought himself of a couple of calls he might have paid: it was too late now, and he was not dressed for calling. He was at Victoria an hour before the train could possibly have been due. He hung about the arrival platform, watching each train as it came in, making a pretence of expecting some one. Then it occurred to him that some of them came from Balham, and that Delia might——. He made for the waiting-room, and read the time-tables hanging there until he knew most of them by heart.

The boat-train was forty minutes late. At least it brought his salvation with it, when it did come. She was leaning out of the window, seeking for him among the crowd. What a noble face it was!—a woman to whom a man might trust his life, his honour, his all, with absolute security. A woman that a man might be proud to die for. And the joy that swept into her face when she recognised him—was it not more than any man could deserve, even to watch in passing? Heaven be thanked that he could once more greet her without secret shame; that he had no more anything

to conceal from her—or would not have, before the evening was past. Lady Stanmore, watching them, felt that some of her misgivings had been unjust. There could be no doubt that Stephen was very much in love with her step-daughter.

They drove back to Eaton Square, upon a golden cloud for all either of them knew to the contrary—Claire recounting the simple annals of her life at Cannes as though she had not already told them in her letters; Stephen detailing all his experiences since his return—with certain reservations. A little time, and even they would be unnecessary—unless, indeed, it might be sparing her unnecessary pain—if he told her—only so much as were necessary to make her clearly understand what—the exact position. He must make up his mind about that; it would not do to be needlessly brutal, just because he wanted to relieve his conscience. She would be quite miserable enough as it was.

He was so happy that he felt at peace with all the world—even with Mr. Jennings. After all, poor devil, he probably had his back up against the wall—was fighting for his very existence. He could do no harm unless indeed—supposing John Blaicklock should get to hear of things? It would break the poor chap's heart—ruin his life. Still, what must be must be. Perhaps it might be as well to put in a friendly word for the poor little bounder Jennings—if a favourable opportunity occurred.

Never could the grim portraits of the ancestral Stanmores have looked down upon a gayer dinner-party. Stephen was at his most irresponsible best. It would be time enough to be grave when he came to his con-

fession; in the meanwhile it could do no harm to show how much he appreciated Claire's return.

They were left alone as soon as the most exacting pair of lovers could have demanded; it might almost have been arranged beforehand. Sir James found that he had forgotten some very important correspondence which he must attend to without delay, for the hour was already late; Lady Stanmore went down to the library with him to fetch a book, and forgot to return. Stephen lost no time in coming to the point. He did not want to be interrupted in the middle, for one thing. For another, he knew himself well enough to realise that it would be dangerous to delay. Once or twice during dinner he had caught himself wondering whether it would not be wiser to leave well alone. It seemed so unfair to Claire that she must be made unhappy on the very evening of her return. It was certainly not the most appropriate moment. They had all been so gay together; even Sir James displaying a hitherto unsuspected vein of flippancy. To come suddenly down to tragedy was lacking in artistic finish. Should he—or should he not—put off the evil day? No, he would not; he had made up his mind. For once in a way he would keep to it.

"Claire, I have something I want to tell you."

"I know quite well what it is. You have told me so more than fifty times to-night already. So do I. With all my heart—and soul—and being."

It was an unpropitious beginning. He waited a little.

"It is——. Claire, I have something to confess."

"You bad boy, you have been taking cabs again. I can see it in your eye."

"It's worse than that, dearest."

"Worse than that? You don't mean—you haven't been buying me things again?"

He had not meant to produce the muff-chain until later in the evening, but this direct attack left him no option.

"How wicked of you, dearest. What a perfect dream it is! I was telling Margaret only this afternoon in the train that I should have to get one as soon as I got back. It must have been telepathy. I am very angry with you, all the same."

He had no opportunity to resume for some time.

"Now, dearest. To come back to my confession."

"What a tease you are, Stephen! And it is such an old joke, too."

"I'm not joking."

"I know you aren't. You are never so serious as when you are trying to take me in. Don't you think it is time you gave up inventing crimes, so that I may forgive you for them. You can't deceive me with your grave face as you could once. I know you too well, now."

"Then you won't hear it?"

Of course, if she refused, there was no more to be said.

"I don't mind, if it amuses you. And I forgive you. I don't mind a bit."

"What have I been doing, then?"

"Let me think. It isn't cabs, this time. And it isn't—. I know. You've been flirting. With—um—yes—I know. With that pretty little—what was her name—Mrs. Blaick—something. Now confess."

She pointed an accusing forefinger at him.

"Right, first time. Well, do you give me absolute?"

"Stephen." She grew suddenly grave. "Do you remember Margaret once telling you that you shouldn't make jokes at your own expense so often? She was really quite right. Of course it doesn't matter with me, because I know you through and through. But other people don't understand, especially when you tell them the most dreadful things about yourself, with the gravest possible face. Dearest, I want you to promise me that you won't do it any more. Not even to me."

"But supposing I happened to be in earnest?"

"I should know already. Before you spoke. I dare say you will laugh at me, Stephen, for what I am going to say. But—I suppose it is because we love each other so dearly—I always know when you are ill or unhappy, even when we are away from each other, or you try to keep it from me. Don't you remember, just after we were engaged, when you were knocked down by that hansom? I felt that something had gone wrong, long before I heard about it. And this time, just before you came out to Cannes, when you were so seedy. I was terribly unhappy that very day—Margaret will tell you how depressed and irritable I was, without any reason whatever. So you see, dear, if you had ever done anything that you were ashamed of, or that you knew was wrong, I should know it at once, without your telling me. Though, of course, I know you much too well to think that you could do anything that wasn't absolutely good and true and honourable. But you will promise me, won't you?"

"I'll try not to any more, Claire."

"Then, as a reward, you may make love to as many pretty ladies as you like."

He determined to make one more effort. After that, no one could say that he had not done his best.

"There is one thing, dearest——"

"I am not going to listen to any more miseries. Now, don't let us waste any more time. Margaret may come back at any moment."

It occurred to Stephen when, after a generous interval, Sir James and his wife reappeared, that it would be well to get Mr. Jennings off his hands at once. The matter was a delicate one; he determined to call Lady Stanmore to his assistance. Claire would have been, perhaps, an even more useful intermediary, but to make use of her in such a cause was impossible. Lady Stanmore, after some slight demur, agreed to break the ice for him.

"I don't see that you need hesitate to speak to my husband about it," she went on, in a louder key.

"James, here is Stephen wanting to ask a favour of you; but he is too shy to come to the point."

"Shyness is the last complaint I should have suspected him of suffering from," smiled Sir James, still in his most benevolent mood.

"It isn't exactly that, sir. I am only afraid that you will suspect me of being impertinent."

"I daresay it would be possible to forgive you even that."

"After all, Stephen, you say you promised the poor man," put in Lady Stanmore.

"That's the worst of it. I wouldn't have, but he practically forced me to."

"Don't make such a mystery of it, my boy. If it is

anything that I can possibly do, you may be sure I shall not grudge it."

"The truth is that a man named Jennings—I have known him for a long time off and on—he used to be a clerk in a firm that I know something of, and he recently started in business on his own account."

"Well?"

"He's got an account with Stanmores' Bank."

Sir James came as near to frowning as was possible with him. "You know, my dear Stephen, that I make it a rule never to bring my business home with me."

"That is exactly why I did not like to speak with you about it. But the man was weeping all over my studio, and——"

"Let us hear what he wants. I seem to have some remembrance of the name."

"He——"

"Stay. I remember now. His firm is called Jennings and Groschen, is it not?"

"Something of the sort. They are quite little people, I think."

"Quite so. A very small account indeed. What does he want?"

"As far as I could make out, they have got all their money tied up in their stock, and are afraid that you are going to make them sell it all at a loss and ruin themselves—or something. He talked to me for hours,—but I am not at all clear about it, except that he begged me to intercede with you. I told him that you would probably kick me out of the window if I did; but he seemed quite ready to take the risk of that."

"You are much too good-natured, Stephen. I need hardly say that I am not in the least offended at your

speaking to me about it. But you will understand that I cannot let any personal considerations enter into business matters."

"Just what I told him you would say. And then he started licking my boots so offensively, that I had to say something to get rid of him. I understand that he only wants more time to realise his stock than you were going to allow him. I ought to say that I know nothing whatever about his character or standing. I think, though, that his late employers had a good opinion of him."

"Speaking from memory, I believe that I have seen him once or twice and that he impressed me rather unfavourably. At any rate I will look into the matter personally, and will be as lenient as possible. It is often the case that such men lose their heads when they find themselves in possession of a certain amount of money, and get themselves into difficulties in consequence. I will certainly do what I can, after what you have said."

"I am very much obliged to you, sir. And I can assure you that I shall not take it as a precedent."

"I hope not, my dear boy. The whole thing is decidedly irregular. And now—tell me how you have been getting on yourself. I am afraid I know very little about art matters, though I have frequently seen your name in the newspapers recently."

Claire bid her betrothed farewell with even more than her usual tenderness.

"It was so like you, dearest one, to fight the poor man's battle for him, even at the risk of a rebuff. You are much too soft-hearted, dear—and I love you for it."

"Now you are talking nonsense, silly one."

"I wish it didn't always annoy you to be told the truth about yourself. You never like me to say what I really think of you. I believe you would rather that I scolded you all the time—for things you haven't done."

"It was awfully good of your father not to kick me."

"It only shows how much you have gained in his good opinions recently. I was a tiny bit frightened myself as to how he would take it. I am sure if any one else had spoken to him on such a subject—even myself—he would not have liked it. But he has got to see how noble—oh—but I mustn't say that."

CHAPTER TWENTY

MR. MANWELL was late in arriving at his office upon the Saturday morning. Being usually among the most punctual of the staff, this drew upon him the attention of his superiors more directly than would have been the case with his less conscientious colleagues. The assistant-manager was about to reprimand him severely, but was forced to accept his excuse—that he was not feeling well—so obviously was it justified by his appearance. He was pale; his eyes were red and shrunken; the hand which held his pen trembled so that he could hardly write. He spoke to no one, but was observed to mutter fiercely to himself at frequent intervals, as though something unpleasant were weighing upon his mind. So markedly did these symptoms increase during the morning that the assistant-manager, upon his attention being drawn to the facts, decided that Mr. Manwell must be sickening for influenza and graciously intimated that he might go home and go to bed. He refused, saying that he had nothing the matter with him. Half an hour later he descended from his high stool, took his hat and overcoat, and left the office without saying a word to any one.

His first visit was to a pawnbroker's shop in the neighbourhood of Bishopsgate, one of those establishments where anything and everything is offered for sale, from concertinas and chromolithographs to silver-plated fish knives and marble clocks. In one window

were a number of cheap revolvers, at prices ranging from seven and sixpence upwards. Mr. Manwell, having first provided himself with a gun-license at the nearest post-office, negotiated the purchase of one of these weapons and of an appropriate stock of cartridges, giving as his reason for wanting it, that he was about to undertake a cycling tour in the South of Ireland. The pawnbroker's assistant was but mildly interested, made no comment upon the unsuitability of the season, and endeavoured to sell him a pair of second-hand opera glasses as being the very things to carry when cycling. From Bishopsgate, Mr. Manwell travelled by Underground to Sloane Square and so arrived, in due course, at Rodney Street. On his way he sought out a quiet corner, in a piece of waste land sheltered by an advertisement hoarding, and loaded the revolver, which was of the old-fashioned pin-fire type. He had never handled such a weapon before, but the pawnbroker's assistant had given him brief instruction in its workings and he did not expect to have to make actual use of it.

He did not know the number of Cartmel's studio, so knocked at the first door he came to. A young lady-artist, in a long blue pinafore, opened it to him and regarded him with strong disapproval, perhaps because he was so manifestly not the type of an art-patron. She did not know where Mr. Cartmel lived. He tried several doors, but it was not until he came to his fourth attempt that he could obtain any information. There he was told, by an elderly gentleman in a blue blouse that was half hidden beneath the scrapings of his palette-knife, that he was within two doors of his goal.

"I don't know whether he'll be able to see you, though," added the artist, who was noted for his warm interest in other people's business. "I believe he has a lady sitting to him. He had, three-quarters of an hour ago."

"Who was she? What was her name?" asked Mr. Manwell, fiercely.

"Upon my word, I don't know. She had a carriage waiting for her, with two horses, and a coronet on the panels. She had another lady with her. I happened to be looking out as she drove up. I don't see the carriage now, though. I shouldn't wonder if——"

Mr. Manwell waited to hear no more and beat heavily upon the indicated knocker. The door was opened, after a short delay, by Adam, who received the visitor with his customary smile. Mr. Cartmel was at home, and, for the moment, disengaged. Mr. Manwell, having recovered from the shock of such a sable apparition upon his already disordered nerves, thereupon entered, refusing to give his name.

Stephen came to him in a few minutes. He was not surprised—certainly not pleased—to recognise his visitor. He had but that morning received a note from Delia, giving particulars of the scene at Brabazon Road overnight, and had been wondering what Mr. Manwell would do next. He greeted him with his usual friendliness.

"This is good of you. Pleased to see you. Have you brought your every-day book?"

If looks could kill, Stephen would have been a dead man there and then. It was noticeable that, in the extremity of his hatred, Mr. Manwell's whole aspect was changed—as though the real soul of the man had

burst through the commonplace veneer superimposed upon it by his life of office drudgery. Certainly he presented, if not a nobler, at least a more impressive figure than the melancholy Mr. Manwell who had devoured Delia with his eyes in the drawing-room at "The Laurels." Stephen wondered, watching him, if he could not make some use of his expression as a study for Othello. He waited, with his usual air of polite attention, for an answer to his greetings, but none came.

"Is anything the matter?" he inquired at last, feeling that it was impossible to ignore Mr. Manwell's attitude. "You are not ill?"

Mr. Manwell ground his teeth at the patronising inflection. "I want to speak to you—on a matter of urgent importance."

Stephen put his hand in his pockets and, leaning against the mantelpiece, awaited events with an encouraging smile.

"You—you are a damned scoundrel!"

Stephen lifted his eyebrows. He took a silver case from his pocket and extracted a cigarette. "You don't smoke, do you?" He lit the cigarette and threw the match into the fire. "Surely that isn't all."

Mr. Manwell lost what was left to him of self-composure. "You have got to give up annoying Mrs. Blacklock—with your insolence. That's what I've come to tell you. If you don't—I'll—I'll——"

Stephen thoughtfully ejected a wreath of smoke.

"Doesn't it strike you you are rather absurd?"

"I won't have it—I tell you. You leave her alone. She doesn't want to have anything to do with you. You are a blackguard; that's what you are."

He was trembling from head to foot, scarcely retaining the power to enunciate his words.

"Did Mrs. Blacklock send you here to tell me so?"

"I've come—because I won't stand by and see her ruined by a—low beast like you."

Stephen took out his watch and regarded it with mild interest.

"You take my advice and go and talk to Blacklock about it. He is the man who ought to know. As a matter of common sense, if there was any truth in what you say, would it be any good confiding in me? Seriously, now."

He looked at his watch again.

"I am sorry to interrupt our chat—but I am rather busy this morning. So I fear you will have to go. In—shall we say, two minutes?"

His calm insolence acted like oil upon the fire which raged in Mr. Manwell's bosom. His consciousness that this man ought to be cringing before him, appealing for mercy, instead of looking down upon him from an immorally intellectual pinnacle, was unendurable. He felt he was in the right; he felt that he was as good a man as his tormentor; but felt, as well, as if the positions were reversed and as though he were a tongue-tied schoolboy, being mocked by a contemptuous master. He slipped his right hand into his pocket and gripped what lay within it.

"You—you shall hear what I've got to say. I'll make you—by force, if necessary."

"When you have recovered your self-control—would you like me to ring for a glass of water?—it may occur to you that up to the present you have confined yourself to generalities. If you have anything to

say that it is possible for me to make head or tail of, please say it as quickly as you can. I don't want to have to kick you out, you know."

The whole proceedings were becoming a maddening mockery of what had taken place at "The Laurels" overnight. At least it should not end in the same anticlimax. He would force himself to be calm.

"I saw you with her at London Bridge Station. I've got a witness, mind. I can prove what I say."

"And you object to my being seen with a lady at London Bridge Station—is that it? Well, that is something definite, at least. Now you can go—quietly, I should suggest—or I shall really have to make you."

Mr. Manwell tried to speak, but his rising fury made for incoherency. "I—I—you——" Stephen was regarding him as though he were a curious insect. He could stand it no longer. What he was about to do was justified by every law of God—as set forth in all the novels he had ever read—however it might be with those of man. He had not meant to take such an extreme step, but Delia must be saved at any cost from this smiling, mocking fiend. He snatched the revolver from his pocket and rushed at Stephen.

He had not quite mastered the mechanism of the lock, and even as he fumbled with it, endeavouring to set the trigger, Stephen caught him a sharp blow on the chin. The revolver flew from his hand and struck the wall, going off as it did so, the bullet shattering the glass of one of the pictures. Mr. Manwell, staggering back, brought up against the table, upon which were still the remains of Stephen's breakfast. It overturned with a loud crash of crockery, Mr. Manwell falling in the midst. He was by no means subdued, and, scram-

bling to his feet, was on the point of renewing hostilities, when he was interrupted by the sudden irruption of Adam from the kitchen.

"Strike me 'oly," cried that gentleman, holding him back. "Wot's the little gaime? 'Ere, wotyer think you're playin' at, you little blighter?"

Stephen had meanwhile secured the revolver and returned to his position by the mantelpiece.

"You see, Adam, what comes of your smiling this morning. The breakfast service hopelessly ruined. I hope it will be a lesson to you."

"Wotyer want me to do wif 'im, Mister Stephen?" cried Adam, still retaining his hold upon Mr. Manwell.

"I should leave him alone, if I were you. He won't break. And you might leave the room, too."

Adam was too well-drilled to disobey. He did as he was told, but for once his face was guiltless of a smile.

Mr. Manwell felt furtively at his chin and looked more than a little sheepish.

"You see what a mistake it is to read so many novels. You might easily have hurt some one with this toy. Here, take it, and try not to be so foolish in future."

He tossed the revolver contemptuously at Mr. Manwell's feet, who, after some natural hesitation, bent down and secured it. It was still doubtful what he would do next when the back-door opened again, violently, and Bodman entered as though shot from a bow, Adam's dusky features lowering behind him.

"Really, Bodman, this isn't a football match."

Bodman was disconcerted. "I beg your pardon, but I heard a pistol-shot, and Adam told me you were being murdered."

"Adam was mistaken. There has only been a slight difference of opinion and some damage to the coffee cups. My—young friend here was just going as you came in."

Mr. Manwell turned suddenly towards the newcomer.

"Look here, sir—you listen. This Mr. Cartmel here is making love to a married lady—my sister-in-law that is to be."

"Hold your damned scandal-mongering tongue," cried Stephen, in sudden heat. "And get out. I've had enough of this."

There came a knocking at the front door, but it passed unheeded.

"I've come to tell him he's got to stop, or I'll shoot him dead. He is a—a—villain—a—seducer—and the wife of his best friend."

Stephen caught him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him towards the door. "Adam, get the door open," he cried breathlessly, finding the task of ejecting his unwelcome guest more arduous than he had expected. He was not yet within measurable distance of it when he was confronted by Mr. Jennings, who had entered when the door was opened by Adam, and who was gazing upon the struggle with eyes of goggling wonderment. At the sight of him, Mr. Manwell ceased to struggle, so unexpectedly that Stephen lost his grip upon him.

"Here, Mr. Jennings, you are the very man I wanted to see." He turned to Bodman. "You listen to him, sir. You'll see whether I'm speaking the truth or not. Weren't you with me at London Bridge, Mr. Jennings, when we saw Mrs. Blaicklock and this—"

this man—getting into a cab? At least, she was getting in. Weren't you, now?"

Mr. Jennings regarded the speaker with almost plaintive surprise. "My dear Manwell, I don't understand you?"

"Last Wednesday, I mean. When we had tea together. They were coming out of the station."

Mr. Jennings pondered conspicuously. "I seem to think I had tea; yes—I remember. But I didn't see Mr. Cartmel there—and—who do you say was with him?"

"Mrs. Blacklock. Carrie's sister. You must remember."

"Of course I should, if I'd seen them. I hope I'm too much the gentleman not to have taken my hat off if I had. Oh, no; you must be wrong about that. Because, I'm sure, if either of us had seen Mr. Cartmel we should have mentioned it to the other. A mutual friend, you know."

The confounded Mr. Manwell glared at him as though horns had suddenly sprouted from his head. "I see it all now. It's a conspiracy. He's been paid to say this. I might have guessed it when I saw him at the corner of Lombard Street yesterday. Don't you believe him, sir. They're both in it."

There was something touching in the confidence in which, while staggering under this heavy blow, he still turned to Bodman for credence. But he felt himself a beaten man, for he remembered, now, that it was after all possible that Jennings had not seen the culprits. On the other hand, how explain his subsequent behaviour?

"I don't know anything at all about it," said Bod-

man judiciously. "So it's no good talking to me. And in any case I don't see much good in arguing about it. It seems scarcely fair to the lady, for one thing."

"Very well—I'll go." He turned threateningly to Stephen. "But I warn you—if you don't mind what you're doing—you'll pay for it."

His rage overcame him again, so that he rushed foaming into the street. Bodman carefully closed the door behind him. "Excitable young man, that," he remarked, returning. "But I mustn't stop chattering here; I've got no end to do."

"Stop a minute, Boddy. And help me try and persuade Mr. Jennings that we're not all mad together. I don't think you've met before, have you?"

Mr. Jennings winked elaborately in the air. "He's not quite all there, you know—that young man. Little bit off the top, as you might say. Got his head turned reading too many novels. I had some trouble of the same sort with him, myself, once. Fine day, sir, isn't it, for the time of year?"

"Won't you celebrate the victory, Mr. Jennings?"

Mr. Jennings hesitated, but felt that the occasion was not altogether propitious. "I mustn't keep you, Mr. Cartmel. I only looked in, having a business call to make in your neighbourhood, to thank you for what you were kind enough to do for me. The party sent for me this morning, and we had a long chat together, and he's promised to see me through. Thanks to what you were so kind as to say, Mr. Cartmel."

"I'm very glad to hear it. You have really no cause to thank me, though. You quite over-estimated my influence in that quarter."

"That's all my eye, Mr. Cartmel. But I only looked

in to say that I shan't forget your kindness in a hurry. Good-morning, gentlemen." As Stephen escorted him over the threshold, he continued in a lower voice: "If there is any little thing I can do for you at any time, you've only got to say it. If you should want to prove an alibi, for instance. Only got to tip me the wink, as the saying is." He winked, as if in affectionate illustration, and walked jauntily away.

Bodman waited until his friend had flung himself, with over-acted carelessness, into an arm-chair.

"What in the world have you been up to, Stephen?"

"My dear fellow, what in the world should I have been up to?"

"I don't want to be inquisitive—and if you want me to dry up, tell me so. But, after all, young men don't go about firing off revolvers for nothing, you know."

"Firing off revolvers? What gave you that idea?"

"Adam, for one. And my own ears for another."

"Nonsense, man. You must have heard a pneumatic motor-tire going off, somewhere outside. They make a noise just like a pistol-shot."

"Yes—and break all the picture glasses for miles around, I suppose." He jerked his head towards the damaged picture on the wall beside him. Stephen blushed.

"Well, I really must get back to my work. Got to finish the 'Coster's Pitch' by to-morrow, somehow. I'm off to Cornwall, you know, on Thursday."

"I wish you'd put it off for a day and see me through my beastly tea-fight."

"I can't possibly, or I would. I've promised to

meet Graeme at Saint Ives on Thursday for certain. I've put him off twice already. Wish you were coming too."

"I wish to God I was. A month's rest is just what I want. I say, Boddy, about our mad friend—how did it strike you?"

"Ask me another. I don't know the details."

Stephen took up the poker and balanced it on a finger. He brought the knobbed end to his face and looked carefully along it, as if to reassure himself that it was perfectly straight.

"The amusing part of it is—that's he quite in the right."

"I knew that already."

"How?"

"Putting two and two together. Casual references to blackmailers—and the divorce laws. And some one—I forget his name—told me, he'd seen you with a damned pretty woman in a first-class carriage of an Eastbourne train, one day. When you had gone to spend the day with your Aunt Eliza, I think it was."

"I suppose you think I'm a low beast."

"M—m—m—no. Bad case of the artistic temperament, I put it down to. Love of beauty carried to extremes."

"Boddy, I'm going to make a clean breast of it. I'm in a devil of a mess."

"One usually is by the time it comes to making a clean breast of it."

"I never meant any harm. I swear I didn't."

"One never does, in these cases, I believe."

"I just—just slipped into it."

"I am given to understand that one always does—"

in these cases." He shook his head impatiently. "Don't make it worse, old man. When we've done a mean thing, it's ever so much better to look it in the face. If you go on, you'll be quoting Adam—the other Adam, I mean, in a bit."

"What do you mean?"

"Saying that the woman gave you the apple and you did eat."

"No—no—I'm not such a skunk as all that, Boddy. It wouldn't be true, either. She's as good a little woman as ever—, or she was until I came along, like the wolf in Red Riding Hood. You mustn't think she's a bit to blame. It was my fault, altogether."

He rested his chin mournfully on the top of the poker.

"She is so damnably pretty."

"I shouldn't wonder if the same thing had occurred to her husband. Close friend of yours, I think the young man mentioned."

"Don't! you needn't rub it in. I'm not trying to excuse myself. Besides, she never cared for him. She told me so."

"They usually do, I expect."

"Don't stand and sneer at me, for God's sake. Tell me what I have got to do about it."

Bodman went to him and laid his hand caressingly on his bowed shoulder.

"I'm not sneering, old man. Do? Do the right thing—at once. You know what that is as well as I do. Remember, you have Miss Stanmore to think of, too."

"I'm not a blackguard, Boddy. I swear I'm not. You don't think I am? Tell me that you don't."

“Do you think I should waste my time giving you good advice if I did. I think you are a damned young fool, though. I really must get to my work now, Stephen, dear old chap. Come and sit in my place. I don't suppose you are likely to do much yourself this morning.”

Meanwhile, the unfortunate Mr. Manwell, growing more and more frantic with the realisation that whatever he might do towards safeguarding Delia was always turned to his own confusion—hastened back to the City. One chance remained to him of striking a blow at the detested Cartmel. He would lay the facts before Sir James Stanmore. He, at least, was a just man, uninfluenced by either prejudice or malice—he would listen to the proofs producible, and see that justice was done. The one thing necessary was to keep calm.

Unfortunately for his purpose, to keep calm was the one thing which proved impossible. The consciousness of his wrongs, of Blaicklock's blind obstinacy, of Delia's mockery, and of Cartmel's triumph grew more and more unbearable. He hated them all—the whole jeering, unbelieving crew; how he hated them! the injured husband no less than the guilty lovers. Somehow he would be revenged upon them; somewhere he would find justice. Or if he could not find it—and his hand touched the revolver in his pocket always more caressingly. But first, he must lay the facts before Sir James. At once. At once. At once.

Arrived at Lombard Street, he rushed like a whirlwind into the front entrance of the bank, and made his way, hatted and coated, in the direction of the chairman's private room. To reach it he had to pass

along the great public hall, with the broad counter on his right, past the waiting-room in which Mr. Jennings had so often drummed his heels, and through a glass door into a corridor, on either side of which were the rooms of the chief officers of the bank, that of the chairman being at the end facing him.

Being quite beside himself with impatience, he was about to pass the sacred portal without ceremony, when the bank-porter, who, alarmed by his manner, had hastened to follow, interposed his burly form.

"You can't go in there, Mr. Manwell; you know you can't. Sir James is particularly engaged."

"I must go in, I tell you." Mr. Manwell almost screamed in his agitation. "I must see him at once. It's a matter of life and death."

"It's as much as my place is worth to——. Oh, Mr. Fergusson, will you speak to Mr. Manwell, if you please? He insists on entering the chairman's room without an appointment."

The assistant-manager, hearing the altercation, had opened the door of his room.

"Why, Manwell, what has come to you? Do you want to be discharged on the spot? Go to your desk—at once."

Mr. Fergusson held strong views on the temperance question, and was accordingly inclined to attribute any infringement of routine to the effects of alcoholic indulgence. Mr. Manwell's flushed face and excited manner turned his nascent suspicions at once to certainty.

"I don't care whether I am discharged or not. I must see Sir James at once. You are all in a conspiracy against me together."

"Fellows, ask Mr. Graves to come here. You can't go in, I tell you—you madman."

The manager, complying with the summons, gazed horror-stricken upon the unprecedented scene. "For Heaven's sake, get him away," he murmured. He was a man of nervous temperament. "The chairman has the matter of the Chile Loan under consideration. If he should be disturbed——"

Even as he spoke the door of the great man's room opened and he put his head out. "Is anything the matter?" he inquired in some anxiety.

Mr. Graves tore his white whiskers—they were closely modelled upon those of his chairman—in nervous desperation. "Young Manwell, sir—seems to have suddenly taken leave of his senses——"

"I want to speak to you, sir. At once." Mr. Manwell was sobered to some extent by the appearance of the dreaded autocrat, but in no way deterred from his purpose.

Natural annoyance struggled with Sir James' natural politeness.

"You must come at some other time. I cannot be disturbed now."

"I must see you at once, I tell you. It is a matter——"

But the chairman had closed his door and returned to the Chile Loan. This decided rebuff had little effect upon Mr. Manwell; the face of his colleagues peering open-mouthed over the glass-partitions excited him still more.

"Will you let me pass, I say? It's about his scoundrel of a son-in-law."

"We shall have to send for a policeman," groaned

the manager. "We cannot—we positively cannot have the business of the bank disturbed in this way, I never heard of such a thing in my life."

"The man is mad with drink," dogmatised Mr. Fergusson, whose whiskers were iron-grey and uncompromising—in marked distinction from those of his superiors—as though to assert his own individuality. He had thin, straight lips that closed like a mouse-trap, so that on the whole he looked rather as if he wore a bit. "Better leave him to me, Mr. Graves." Mr. Graves desired nothing better, and disappeared into his own room as might an escaped rabbit into its burrow.

"Now, Manwell, you have done it once too often. I have had my suspicions for some time past. This cannot be overlooked. If you take my advice, you will go home at once before I send for the police. If you like to come in on Monday and say what you can for yourself, I will ask Mr. Graves to listen to you, though I can hold out no hopes that you will be reinstated. Fellows, see that Mr. Manwell leaves the premises immediately. If he refuses, you must call in a constable at once."

Mr. Fergusson in turn retired from the scene, while three or four minor officials surrounded Mr. Manwell and with some difficulty hustled him towards the less public part of the building. He still raved and protested, crying out that they were all in a conspiracy against him together, Sir James Stanmore among the rest, and that he would be revenged upon them all. It was fortunate for him that no one happened to discover the revolver which he carried and that it did not occur to him to produce it, as he might easily have

done, so totally was he beyond himself. In the end, reiterated threats of giving him in charge and the departure of Fellows, ostensibly to fetch a policeman for that purpose, brought him so far to see reason that he consented to leave the building. Even so, he narrowly escaped spending the night in a police-cell, for as chance would have it, it being now about the time for Sir James' return home, his brougham was waiting for him at the main entrance. Mr. Manwell, observing this, formed the idea of waiting beside it until his quarry should appear and of then again appealing for a hearing. But some such possibility had already occurred to the watchful porter, who hesitated no longer in calling upon a policeman. The short, sharp injunction to "move on" had its effect: Mr. Manwell disappeared, and Sir James was able to gain his carriage unmolested.

It is uncertain how Mr. Manwell spent the Sunday; certainly he did not put in an appearance at his lodgings. In all probability he wandered aimlessly about the streets, meditating plans for his revenge. For when, Monday having brought wiser counsel, he presented himself at the bank to learn his fate, his clothes were all smirched with mud. He was met by the announcement that the chairman declined to see him; while Mr. Fergusson, refusing to go into details, curtly intimated that it had been found impossible to overlook his intemperate behaviour, and handed him a month's salary neatly wrapped up in a clean piece of white paper.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Now I wonder what the deuce I am to do with you!" said Stephen, gazing meditatively at Mr. Hungerford Deverell. "I've got to explain you away somehow, you know."

Mr. Hungerford Deverell was a small man with a straggling black moustache and a week's growth upon his chin. He might have passed for an undertaker in uneasy circumstances, but for his melancholy expression. His hair was black; so, to a less degree, was his linen; he wore a greasy old frock coat and a wispy black tie; his finger-nails were in deep mourning. His whole suggestion was one of faded gentility that had long since forgotten its own meaning. He found Stephen's calm scrutiny embarrassing, and, as he stood before him, swayed bashfully from one leg to the other.

"Anything that I can do to oblige, Mr. Cartmel. Always make things easy for all parties, is my motto, sir. I have known what it is to be temporarily inconvenienced myself. Very often indeed, if you'll believe me, sir."

"I might carry you through as a wealthy and eccentric picture-buyer," meditated Stephen. "Or a model. Yes, Mr. Deverell, I think you will have to be a model, for this afternoon at any rate. Why in the world old Clutterbuck should have chosen to-day to make himself disagreeable, I can't imagine."

Mr. Deverell fluttered his hands apologetically.

"Of course I have no say in the matter, sir. I should be happy to take any pose that you might think desirable, Mr. Cartmel. As 'Ajax defying the lightning,' now. Or 'Prometheus bound.'"

"With a vulture, in the shape of a man in possession gnawing at his vitals, I suppose. You seem to know all about it."

"Ah, Mr. Cartmel, sir, I was not always what I am now. I was once in possession—he-he! excuse my jest—of a competency, and, in my humble way, a patron of the fine arts. I remember on one occasion buying engravings of the two subjects I have mentioned—the recollection, in fact, suggested them—for the sum of three guineas the pair, and uncommonly cheap they were at the price."

"You don't feel inclined to speculate in anything you see here?"

The little man fluttered again.

"Unfortunately, much as I could desire it——" He shrugged his shoulders. "My father left me three thousand pounds—he did, I assure you, Mr. Cartmel. He was a second-hand iron-merchant and much respected."

Stephen yawned. Delia was not due for another hour and he did not want to think about the scene which must ensue.

"You managed to get rid of it?"

Mr. Hungerford Deverell smiled apologetically.

"Perhaps Mr. Cartmel will understand me if I say—he-he! excuse my jest—that I had the artistic temperament."

"What the devil do you mean by that?"

"No offence meant, Mr. Cartmel, I assure you. To make things easy for all parties, is my motto—and has been through life. Alas! Mr. Cartmel, sir, as the poet has it, I had too much appreciation of wine, woman, and song."

"Drink, do you mean?"

"Only partly so; my final ruin came from my sense of beauty—he-he! excuse the jest, no offence intended—and my artistic interest in another man's wife. The damages—to say nothing of the costs. He was a publican in a large way of business."

Stephen's hand clenched ominously.

"If you are trying to be offensive——"

The little man was genuinely alarmed.

"Upon my sacred word, Mr. Cartmel, such an idea——. My object is to make things easy——"

His voice died away in a frightened whimper.

Stephen's brow cleared; he laughed, but shortly.

"So you ran away with another man's wife, did you?"

"To be more precise, Mr. Cartmel, she ran away with me. It usually is so, when it comes to the point, if you'll believe me. I may have paid for the tickets, but she took them—he-he! She was not very happy in her married life."

"And her husband?"

"He was a vindictive wretch. He divorced her. Five hundred pounds damages—not to speak of the costs. And he put me through the Court for it."

"What became of your—of the lady?"

Mr. Hungerford Deverell seemed about to weep, but restrained his tears.

"We parted—in something less than six months.

I never heard what became of her." He struggled with his affecting memories. "Poor Bella! she was a handsome woman. But her temper—it proved to be something shocking. My idea was always to make things easy——"

"But, damn it, man, what possessed you to ruin the woman's life?"

"I was young at the time, Mr. Cartmel, sir. And she was an uncommonly fine woman, though I say it. A blonde, of the statuesque type. She felt that her husband did not understand her."

"That didn't make you any the less a blackguard."

"Upon my sacred word, Mr. Cartmel, I had very little to say in the matter. You don't know what a woman can do with you——"

"The woman gave you the apple and you did eat. Drink, rather, I expect." A ripple of anger passed over his face. "I believe you are drunk now."

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Cartmel, I have been a life-long abstainer for the last three years. Ever since I came out of the—the institution. With only occasional relapses."

"Then—if I thought—— Look here, who's put you up to this?"

Mr. Hungerford shrunk before him. "Upon my sacred word of honour, Mr. Cartmel, I don't know what you mean. You showed a certain interest—— If you don't wish me to intrude——. My object is to make things easy——"

Stephen reassured him with an uneasy smile.

"That's all right. I am a bit upset this morning."

He groaned internally. "So—so you found it didn't pay to neigh after your neighbour's wife?"

Mr. Hungerford Deverell partially recovered his equanimity.

"Pay, Mr. Cartmel, sir! I am accustomed to date my ruin from the day I first met Bella."

"Nonsense, man. If you had stuck to her and lived a decent life——"

The little man did not notice the interruption. "She was in the saloon bar—being temporarily without a barmaid. A most select establishment, if you'll believe me, in Bell Street, Canonbury. She wore a bunch of red roses in her bosom—the gift of a regular customer. I can see them now."

This time Stephen had himself under control. "Look here, I'm expecting a gentleman to call in a few minutes to look at some pictures. It wouldn't do for him to know who you are, you understand. So you'll have to pass as a model."

"I am confident of my ability, Mr. Cartmel. My professional duties have recently taken me into quite a number of artists' studios—if you'll believe me, sir. I shall be pleased to accept a—ahem—a temporary engagement——"

"Oh, that's it. Say half a guinea for the day. Will that suit you?"

"Most handsome, Mr. Cartmel, sir. Payment is usually—he-he! excuse my jest—made in—ahem—advance."

Stephen felt in his waistcoat pocket and produced half a sovereign and a sixpence.

"I shall expect you to make yourself useful, mind. When Mr. Muller comes, you might open the door. My man is off duty for the day, confound him. And afterwards, I have a lady coming—to sit to me—when

I suppose you can make yourself comfortable in the kitchen or somewhere. Later in the day I have a lot of people to tea. There will be a woman to attend to the victualling department, but I daresay you can find something to do."

"You may rely upon my discretion, Mr. Cartmel, sir. My desire is to make things——"

"I'll make it a guinea if everything goes off well."

"I only wish there were a few more gentlemen like yourself, Mr. Cartmel, sir, in the habit of being temporarily inconvenienced——"

"Look here, was that woman's husband a friend of yours?"

"I—er—oh—yes—for a moment I did not follow you. I knew him well. I had a small running account with him—for sundries——"

"Borrowed money of him—you mean. There, that's enough; I don't want to hear any more about your amours. Confound——. There's some one at the door. Must be Mr. Muller. Now, mind how you behave yourself."

Mr. Hungerford Deverell walked with a slight limp, which seemed somehow in keeping with his general appearance. He made towards the door with deferential alacrity.

His presence did not disturb Stephen's equanimity so much as might have been expected. He had plenty of money coming in from one source or another in the near future—or should have, if and when the expected happened—in the way of payment for commissions. If the worst came to the worst, he was for the time being in high favour with his Aunt Eliza, having faithfully repaid the former loan on the appointed

day, and she would no doubt come to his assistance if appealed to. He did not want money; for the time being, indeed, he very much preferred to be without it, in moderation. Mr. Hungerford Deverell's presence would serve two purposes, so far as Delia was concerned: it would prove conclusively that he had not the necessary means for an elopement; it would prevent anything in the nature of a "scene."

Even as the door opened, a disturbing idea came to him. What if Mr. Muller should take it into his head to buy a picture there and then, and to pay cash for it? Such things did happen, just when you didn't want them to. He wanted to be perfectly sincere with Delia in the matter of his lack of means. He had had enough of hypocrisy; it would be a positive luxury to tell the truth for a change. Yet how be sincere in his protestations of poverty if he had a cheque for a couple of hundred or so in his pocket all the time? It was a piece of abominable impertinence in the fellow to mix himself up in other people's affairs in this way. Why couldn't he buy pictures from some one else if he wanted them, instead of forcing himself upon those who would much rather have nothing to do with him and his money?

Mr. Hungerford Deverell bowed in the potential purchaser with all due ceremony. "Mr. Samuel Muller—to wait upon you, sir," he explained with apologetic enthusiasm. "Will you allow me to relieve you of your hat and overcoat, Mr. Muller? A pleasant day for walking, is it not, sir—though rather muddy underfoot."

Mr. Muller advanced determinedly upon Stephen, taking no more notice of Mr. Hungerford Deverell

than if he had been a house-fly. Though his features had been lavishly reproduced in the illustrated press as those of one of the most representative Englishmen of the day, there was nothing prepossessing about them. He was short and very stout, with a head out of all proportion to his body. He was faced like a bull-dog and with as heavy a jowl; his nose was flat and pointed at the tip; his lips protuberant and sensuous; his steel-grey eyes were deeply set, and in them the whole life of the man seemed to concentrate, so sharp and cruel they were. The rest of him, from crown to heel, might have been carved out of wood, and there was a curiously wooden suggestion in the short nod with which he accepted Stephen's greeting. When he spoke, his lips scarcely moved: it was as though his voice came from a phonograph concealed somewhere in his stomach. Any one who was on the look-out for it might have found something vaguely foreign in his accent.

"Mr. Stephen Cartmel? Glad to meet you. Now, Mr. Cartmel, I'm a busy man and my time is valuable. You know who I am and who sent me, and why I am here. I don't profess to know anything about art myself—never had time to master it. I'm making a collection of pictures for my new house in Park Lane. You'll have read all about it in the papers. Mr. Tweeding, the dealer, gives me the benefit of his advice—and I pay him for it handsomely. So—there won't be any need for you to give him a commission on anything I buy from you, and when you fix your prices I hope you'll remember it."

Stephen's heart rose. He would be perfectly justified in refusing to sell his pictures to such a man. It

would be prostituting his art, to devote it to such base uses.

"Hadn't we better see whether you are likely to buy anything before we discuss questions of detail?"

"As you please. Now, Mr. Cartmel, where are these works of art?"

"In the other room, through that door. If you are sure you have time to walk so far."

He led the way into the other studio, doing his best to work himself up into a passion meanwhile. Unfortunately, it was the ridiculous side of the affair which appealed to him most forcibly.

Mr. Muller made for a painting of a dryad peering from her tree at a passing mortal.

"That your idea of a nude?"

"It is."

"Personally," said Mr. Muller, "I like something that looks like real flesh and not like feathers. Tweedling tells me that that isn't the latest thing in nudes—and that yours are."

Stephen scorned any reply, and asked Mr. Muller if he would prefer the pictures placed in any other light.

Mr. Muller declared that all lights were the same to him and added that he would be obliged for a glass of water, as he was feeling thirsty. Stephen suggested that he might prefer to dilute it with whisky.

"No, thanks. My days for being hocussed are over. I do my drinking after business. Not before. Well, aren't you going to tell me which is which?"

"I'm here to answer questions. As to their names—you seem quite as well able to call them names as I am myself."

Mr. Muller turned solidly towards him.

"Look here. Do you want to do business with me, or not?"

"Not in the least. I don't mind your looking at my pictures, if it gives you any pleasure to do so. But my time is valuable too, and you have taken up quite enough of it already."

Mr. Muller's eyes expressed the astonishment which the rest of his features were incapable of showing.

"Damn my eyes!" he ejaculated slowly. "What the——. Look here, Mr. Cartmel, you've no cause to lose your temper. I'm not trying to insult you."

Stephen was not proof against this direct appeal.

"I thought you were," he laughed. "Glad I was mistaken. Will you have a cigar? They're not hocused."

Mr. Muller accepted the peace-offering and set it in his mouth.

"It's like this," he continued. "You've heard of old Joe Isaac's picture-gallery. He goes in for antiques. I want mine to be bang up-to-date. The last word in pictures. No mouldy old corpses that——"

He broke off suddenly as the portrait of Delia caught his attention. "Hello! That's all right! Is that the Stanmore girl?"

"Who? What?"

"Jim Stanmore's girl. You're engaged to be married to her, aren't you? Used to be at school with my Minnie. That's what made me pick your name out. Fine girl, Miss Claire, if she's like that. But I suppose it pays you to flatter 'em a bit. Wonder where she got those eyes from?"

"That isn't a portrait of Miss Stanmore at all."

He was pleased to feel that he was now rapidly losing his temper in reality.

"How much?"

"It is not for sale."

"A commission, eh? Well, that one of the girl in the tree? Though I tell you straight that I can't see where the girl ends and the tree begins."

"You aren't supposed to. That isn't for sale, either."

"Huh! What about this? Look well in my billiard-room—white marble and lapis-lazuli. What do you call it?"

"That is a nocturne in blue and silver. It's not for sale."

"Damn my eyes! Perhaps you'll tell me what you *have* got to sell."

"Nothing at all—to you."

"What's that?"

"I wouldn't sell you one of my pictures for a hundred thousand guineas—that's what."

"Eh?" Mr. Muller gasped and goggled, though otherwise outwardly calm.

"I have put up with your abominable rudeness for at least a quarter of an hour and——" His anger passed, and he relapsed into his usual calm self. "I'm afraid there isn't the remotest chance of our doing business together, Mr. Muller, and, as your time is valuable, I mustn't delay you any longer." He raised his voice, "Deverell! Show this gentleman out."

Even as he spoke, Mr. Hungerford Deverell entered spontaneously. "Mr. John Blaicklock—to wait upon you, sir," he announced, with deferential importance.

Stephen turned with a start.

"Hullo—I didn't see you. How—how are you?"

Your wife hasn't turned up yet. She ought to be here soon, though. Deverell, will you show Mr. Muller out?"

"Damn my eyes!" began Mr. Muller, in dudgeon. He said no more, but crammed his hat down upon his head with ligneous vivacity and followed the obsequious retainer without more ado. "Sorry to hurry you, sir," explained that champion of lost causes, "My object is to make things pleasant for all parties. Gentleman just come in is a large picture-buyer. Very important indeed, sir, if you'll believe me."

Meanwhile: "I'm afraid I turned up at a rather inconvenient moment," said John Blacklock.

"On the contrary, I'm only too thankful you did come. I should have probably lost my temper in another minute or two. I was only routing the Philistines—with the jaw-bone of an ass, I expect you would think, if you heard all the details. Sit down a bit. Mrs. Blacklock will be here in two two's." He caught himself wondering exactly how much his friend's expression would alter if he knew the truth.

Mr. Hungerford Deverell put his head in at the door.

"Are you ready for me to sit now, Mr. Cartmel? And what costume would you wish me to adopt, sir?"

He came closer to Stephen and whispered. "A young person has come, from Mrs. Talbot Ironsides."

"That will be all right. Tell her all the crockery and things I've got are in the kitchen. I told Adam to get them out before he took himself off. Tell her to do exactly as she likes; and that Mrs. Charlton Davies—that I have another young woman coming to help her hand things around. You had better help her."

"You seem to be setting up quite an establishment,"

said John. "I suppose it is for the party this afternoon. What a remarkable looking model you have there. What does he sit for?"

Stephen considered whether he should disclose the model's real character or not. The only objection he could see was that it might hinder Blacklock's departure. But in any case he probably meant to wait for his wife—why otherwise should he have come at all?

And Stephen was not quite sure in his heart whether he wanted him to go or not. If he stayed it would certainly put off the dreaded scene of renunciation for a time.

"Adam has one of his days off. He always takes them at the most inconvenient moments. At the present moment he is probably filling himself with liquor at——" He consulted his watch. "Yes, at the 'Sun and Stars' in Acker Street. He has a regular round of public houses, and always lets me know exactly where he is to be found at any particular hour, in case I should want him. He finishes them up by about six, comes straight home and goes to bed. Extremely regular in his habits, that's one good thing. So I have been round borrowing servants from my married friends for the afternoon."

"I wish we had known. You would have been quite welcome to Annie—and Ellen, too, for that matter."

Stephen thanked him and assured him that he had thought of asking him, but had decided that the distance was too great.

"As to Mr. Hungerford Deverell—well—I needn't make any mystery about it with you. I only have him here, because I can't help it. He won't go."

“ Won’t go? ”

“ He is an emissary of the evil one. Calls himself a man-in-possession, I believe. Or perhaps it’s a broker’s man. Or may be an executioner. Any way, he won’t go. He’s mildly amusing—as it happens.”

Blacklock showed less surprise than might have been expected.

“ I am very sorry, very sorry indeed. Is the amount much—if you don’t mind my asking? ”

“ Oh, it’s nothing. Don’t let that worry you. By the way—I suppose you have lunched? ”

“ Stephen, I suppose it isn’t any good my asking you to let me lend you this money? ”

“ I borrow money of you! I’d rather sell my soul to the devil.”

“ Thanks for the compliment, Stephen. Why? ”

“ Well, for one reason I——. No; really, old man, it is awfully good of you—but——; to tell the truth, I don’t believe in borrowing money. It’s a vile habit to get into. And——”

“ Well, I’m sorry. But of course, if you won’t, you won’t.”

He seemed quite ready to change the subject and looked admiringly at the pictures which, set out on easels, had been arranged round the walls in readiness for Mr. Muller.

“ Hullo! there’s the portrait. May I look? ”

“ Better wait until I have put the last touches to it. But, of course, if you like——”

John did not press the point. He was quartering the walls as if in search of something.

“ Haven’t you got a picture called ‘ The Lovers,’ somewhere? ”?

"Yes; it's behind there—in the corner. I didn't set it out with the others because—well, it's rather out of keeping with my later work. I did it some years back."

"I wish you'd let me have a look at it."

Stephen routed it from its lair and brought it forward to the light. "How do you know anything about it? I never showed it to you before, did I?"

"Delia told me about it. Ah! so that's it? Yes—it's beautiful. How is it you have never sold it?"

"Don't know. Asked too much, I suppose. I never believe in letting my work go for nothing. It doesn't pay in the end."

"I know so little about the prices of pictures. What did you ask for that, for instance?"

"Let me think. Yes—a hundred and fif—. What do you want to know for?"

"I want to buy it."

"Do you? Well, I won't sell it to you."

"Nonsense, man. I'm in earnest about it. It is Delia's birthday, in a day or two now. She has quite fallen in love with it, and I want to give it her as a surprise."

"I—look here, Blaicklock, I'd much rather you didn't. I'd like to give it to you—or to Mrs. Blaicklock, myself. Do let me—and you give her something else."

"I won't, and that's flat. Really, Stephen, I believe you must be trying to quarrel with me. I haven't offended you in any way, have I, old man? Why won't you sell it to me?"

"I don't believe in business transactions between friends. It always ends in ructions."

“Bosh!”

“Besides—you aren’t justified in chucking your money about like that. I’m sure Mrs. Blacklock would agree with me.”

John laughed. “Now we are getting at it. I thought there was some idea of that sort at the back of your mind. Honestly, I can afford it, or I wouldn’t suggest it. And look here, it isn’t a trick, or a sudden idea because you wouldn’t let me lend you any. I came here on purpose to buy the picture.”

“Of course you did.”

“You don’t believe me; but I can prove it.” He produced a pocket-book and took from it a roll of bank-notes.

“There you see. I didn’t know what the etiquette is in these matters, and anyway——”

“You are only piling mystery on mystery. Why on earth should you have thought I couldn’t wait to get a cheque cashed? You had better own up.”

Once more Stephen was in danger of losing his temper. The persistency with which Fate was showering money upon him was becoming annoying, almost alarming. Even John could see that something was the matter.

“I suppose I must make a clean breast of it, then. On condition that you forgive me for my want of tact. I did have a sort of inkling that you were—just for the moment—up a tree. But I had meant to buy ‘The Lovers’ long before that, so it isn’t as if it made any difference.”

“Is it permitted to ask where you acquired the inkling?”

“Well, if I must, it was from something your

friend Bodman let fall. I lunched with him at your club one day, if you remember. And I happened to run up against him in the Strand, yesterday. He was just going away somewhere."

"He told you I was hard up? It was a piece of abominable impertinence on his part."

"Indeed he did not. Only—I gathered as much, from his manner."

"Sounds like the gun-powder plot. Was he crying, or something?"

"What a chap you are, Stephen. No; but of course I asked after you. And for some reason, he seemed as if he didn't want to talk about you—embarrassed, you know. I asked him, straight out, if you were in any trouble, for I can assure you he quite alarmed me. And he as good as admitted that he was a good deal worried about you—though naturally he wouldn't say why. But—well—you are such a generous sort of fellow, Stephen—and I knew, of course, that—well—the only thing that he would be likely to be worried about in you would be, that you might have—just for the moment, overshot the constable. And that is all the mystery. You mustn't think that we talked you over behind your back, or anything of that sort. I am quite sure, from the way he spoke of you, that Mr. Bodman is genuinely fond of you. And I needn't tell you what I think about you."

"You are a good sort, Tiger, old man. And, I assure you, I do quite appreciate your motive in coming along. But all the same, I would very much rather you didn't buy that picture."

"Then all I can say is, I am going to buy it whether you like it or not. So that's settled."

Just then came a deferential tapping and Mr. Hungerford Deverell. "Begging your pardon, Mr. Cartmel, sir, for the intrusion, but the young person wishes to know if you only have six teaspoons."

"By Jove, yes. It will be all right, though. My aunt has promised to lend me some silver. It ought to be along by now. Tell her it will be all right."

The pseudo-model was about to retire, when John Blacklock detained him. "Do you think you could find me a piece of brown paper and some string? Perhaps you wouldn't mind wrapping that picture up for me?" He indicated "The Lovers." "I am going to take it away with me."

Mr. Hungerford Deverell could not conceal his perturbation. He looked appealingly at Stephen, who was however sunk in some private and not too pleasant meditations. "I am very sorry, Mr. Blacklock, sir—but the fact is——. Er—yes, to be sure—that picture was purchased by the gentleman who has just gone. At least, he did not exactly purchase it, but—er—yes—he particularly wished that it should not be taken away, until—if you will believe me."

For a moment John looked puzzled. Suddenly understanding of the situation came to him, and he smiled, but covertly, lest he should hurt Stephen's feelings.

"I understand; yes—of course. Excuse me a minute, Stephen."

He went aside with Mr. Deverell and conversed with him in a low voice. Whatever he said carried conviction with it, for the little man made no further objection to the removal of the picture, but himself assisted to prepare towards that end.

"The Lovers" was too large a painting to be carried comfortably under one arm, but Blaicklock was accustomed to making the best of things. "I am going to take our friend away with me," he said. "I will put that matter right for you at once. It is only a few steps out of my way. We can settle up exactly, afterwards. Come along, Mr. Deverell," he added in a lower voice. "If you can spare him, Stephen, that is."

"I suppose you must have it your own way." After all, if Fate was determined to have it so, where was the sense of useless repinings. At least, he need not mention the episode to Delia. But what if her husband should do so? No; there was no danger of that; John Blaicklock was not the man to wear other people's hearts upon his sleeve. She would be bound to know of it some day—on her birthday at latest—but even then she was not likely to learn exactly when the money had changed hands. Unless—how if she should meet her husband driving away with the canvas already in his possession?

There were three bank-notes, for fifty pounds each, lying upon his painting table when he looked up. Evidently John Blaicklock had forgotten to deduct the sum which he must pay to get rid of Mr. Hungerford Deverell. Stephen put two of the notes into his pocket-book. The third he enclosed in an envelope, and shut up in the secret drawer of his writing-desk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was about half past three when John Blacklock left the studio. Delia had proposed to come as soon after that hour as she could contrive, ostensibly that a few supplementary finishing touches might be put to the portrait, really to make final preparations for her elopement. The lovers had not met since the day of the eventful excursion to the Surrey Hills, but their correspondence, thanks to the news-shop in the Clapham Road, had been continuous. Delia, in each of her letters, had urged that if they were going to elope at all, it were well to waste no further time ere doing so. It was impossible, she contended, feeling as she did, to go on living her old life at "The Laurels." The constant, smiling hypocrisy which it entailed was very much more wicked than to boldly throw off the mask and take the consequences, whatever they might be. If Stephen had the faintest shadow of doubt in his mind as to the desirability of such a step, she begged him, repeatedly, to think of it no more. It would probably kill her, but that was a small thing, to her mind, compared to what she must endure, were she to discover, after the event, that he regretted it. For her own part, she had thought the thing out in all its bearings; she gloried in her love for him; she realised that it would entail much pain and suffering to a number of people who had never injured them and to whom they owed much; but, after all, some one must

suffer, whatever course they followed. No doubt he—by which pronoun she always now referred to her husband—would forget her in time. She hoped that he would; she was quite certain that she had never been worthy of him, although she had done her best to make him happy. In other letters, she would detail the sacrifices which they themselves would have to make and the penalties they must expect. She begged that Stephen would think well before he decided to sacrifice so much of his social and professional prospects; that he should remember the ostracism to which he must look forward; the almost inevitable loss of income; he must consider whether such an insignificant creature as herself was worth it. He must remember, also, that the beauty which he now raved about—such as it was—would not endure for ever. Was he sure that his love would last even when she became stout and elderly and even dowdy—when he came to understand what an ignorant person she really was and how incapable of amusing conversation? For her own part, she could only say that she was his, absolutely and irrevocably; her whole soul and being were wrapped up in him; she lived only in the hope of making him happy. Nothing else in the world mattered. Nothing.

Stephen—having done what was to do in providing for an adequate stock of teaspoons—read and reread her letters while he waited for her coming. They did not make his task seem easier. Yet he must go through with it—if only for her sake. The idea of eloping was become altogether untenable—at any rate in the immediate future. Supposing they were to do so—on the hundred pounds provided by her

husband: to say nothing of the black perfidy of such an action, what was to happen when it came to an end—as must happen within a very few weeks? They could not remain in England, but how could he hope to make a living abroad? His present connection would be absolutely lost to him: that was certain. After a year or two he might hope to make some headway again, but what was to become of them in the meanwhile? On the other hand, it was equally impossible to let things go on while he endeavoured to make provision against the day when it would be needed. It was true that the young lunatic, Manwell, was disposed of, but there remained always the blackmailing Jennings. He was seemingly in a grateful mood at present, but it would endure no longer than until the next time he was in need of money or credit. He would no doubt spend his time in playing the spy, in order to obtain data upon which to base his next demand for hush-money. Yet again, the proposed date of Stephen's marriage was approaching. He could not, in common decency, find pretexts for putting it off from month to month, while completing his preparations to elope with another woman. He certainly could not play the blackguard—which was what it would amount to—after his marriage. If he broke off the engagement, it would in all probability kill Claire, who loved him as much, and deserved a great deal better of him than did Delia. No—consider it how he would, the only possible thing to be done was to definitely break off his relations with Delia at once. How he was to set about it—that he must leave to settle itself in the course of the ensuing interview.

Delia did not keep him waiting long. She arrived within ten minutes of her husband's departure, looking more ravishingly pretty than ever. It was easy to see that she had suffered during the last week; there were dark rims under her eyes and she was paler than usual, but her eyes seemed the brighter, her lips the rosier, in consequence. There were tears on her lashes as she came eagerly towards him, though her emotion did not so far overcome her prudence but that she first carefully closed the door behind her and turned the key to such a position in the lock that no inquisitive eye could overlook them. It would have been as ungracious as he found it impossible not to respond to her eager welcome. For a time they forgot the world in each other's arms, releasing themselves only that they might gaze the more intently into each other's eyes. Stephen, powerless to act otherwise, yet realised that it was a bad introduction to what was to come.

As was customary, she was the first to recall the circumstances of their surroundings. "You are sure nobody can hear?" she inquired.

"Nobody. Adam is away for the afternoon. The girl who opened the door to you is breaking plates in the kitchen. You can hear her at it. Listen. There is another one coming in half-an-hour or so, but we shall hear when she does come."

"Then—you can begin telling me how much you love me again. You haven't done so nearly enough—yet."

It was now or never. If he came again under the full influence of her eyes, his resolution might be gone for ever.

"Delia, we must talk seriously for a little. We haven't got much time, you know."

"Be quick, then, and get it over, Mr. Solemnity."

Responsive to his expression, her own became more serious. "Have you settled anything yet? When is it to be? I shall be ready, dear, whenever you want me. You know that, don't you?" She waited a little minute. Then: "Nothing has gone wrong, Harry, has it?" She had insisted on calling him by his second Christian name, rather than by his first, when she found that Claire Stanmore addressed him habitually as Stephen. "Don't be afraid to tell me. I will be very brave."

"Nothing has gone right, dear."

"He hasn't——"

"No. It is nothing of that sort. Only the everlasting lack of pence. Things are about as bad as they could be, in that way."

"Only that?" She gave a sigh of relief. "You frightened me. I thought——. Well, we mustn't make ourselves unhappy over that. It will mean waiting a little longer, that's all. I would rather not—you know why—but if it must be, it must, I suppose. Don't look miserable, my own one. Things will come right in time."

He was casting desperately around him for some way in which to introduce his evil tidings most gently, but his brain seemed torpid; he could think of nothing.

"You don't mean——" She gave a little gasp of dread. "You haven't—changed your mind?" The moment was come.

She sat very still, not a muscle of her face moved, while he was speaking. He laid the facts of the case

very simply before her; he pointed out the impossibility of starting their new life without means; the impossibility of continuing their present clandestine meetings; the increasing risk of discovery now that the suspicions of such a man as Jennings had been aroused; the hopelessness of waiting on events. He assured her—and he knew that he was speaking truth—that his love for her was unchanged; that he would always love her; that without her the whole course of his life would be barren and desert. He reproached himself bitterly that he should have brought such misery into hers; he called himself a cur and a coward. He would willingly lay down his life for her—but——

When at last he had finished and sat, in dumb misery beside her, she turned her face from the wall before her at which she had been gazing and looked at him. He did not attempt to meet her eye, but stared at the ground before him. She laid her hand for a moment upon his, as though to show that she understood and pitied him.

“I am sorry,” she said at last, very gently. “I ought to have understood. It was only because I loved you so much that I was so blind.”

For the first time in his life he felt himself absolutely at the mercy of another. He hung upon her words in quaking self-abasement.

“I will go away now,” she went on. “You must not be unhappy. In time, perhaps, we shall both get over it.” He would have given ten years of his life to say what was in his heart, but the immovable logic of hard fact held him tongue-tied.

“I shall go away—somewhere. I couldn’t go back

and live with him, again. I should feel it was a crime."

He looked up at her at last. Her face was marble-like in its impassivity. "You—you—mean to leave him?"

"I am not a good woman, dear. I suppose I am really a very wicked one. But—even—I—am not so wicked as that would make me."

In his anticipations of the scene, he had dreaded most that she would break down, appeal to him to be merciful to her, even heap reproaches upon him for his cowardice; but this was proving a hundred times worse. He rose to his feet and stood beside her. Every nerve in him was aching to retract what he had said, to throw himself at her feet and implore her to forget, to come away with him at once, and for ever to take him to her heart and hold him there, to be his as he was altogether hers. Yet something that was nobler than himself held him back; forced upon him the acknowledgment of his own weakness; lifted him to the point of thinking for her rather than for himself; of acknowledging that he was not of that steadfast nature which could ensure the lasting happiness of such a woman under such circumstances as theirs would be. She must be despising him, in her heart, as a coward, yet he was not now restrained by cowardice. Even five minutes before, he realised—and writhed in the realisation—it was the coward in him which had prompted his renunciation of her love; now it was different. He must hold along the same course that his cowardice had marked out for him, but it was in another spirit; he had drawn back for his own sake, he must continue to do so for hers.

"Do you hate me, Delia?" he asked her suddenly.

"I love you, dear," was all she answered him.

They stood thus, for a time, gazing into each other's eyes, each understanding something of what was passing in the other's heart. "Would it—make it more difficult for you, dear, if you were to kiss me once, before I go?" she asked him suddenly. "We shall never see each other again, now. I think it would make me stronger—to bear things."

He caught her in his arms, in reverence, though, rather than in passion, and their lips met. As they stood there, forgetting everything but their own misery, something—it was scarcely a noise—came from beside the door. They turned simultaneously and started, horror-struck by what they saw there. John Blaicklock was standing in the entrance, staring at them in incredulous amazement.

For a moment there was dead silence. Then, from the other side of the door, came the piping tones of Mrs. Reynolds. "Are they in there, John? Have you found them?" The sound seemed to recall John Blaicklock to life. Without taking his eyes from the convicted culprits, he called out, in a voice which was an excellent imitation of his own, "Yes, mother. They are in here. I have found them."

The door opened and Mrs. Reynolds came in, radiant in her possession of a smart black silk cape, a-glitter with jet ornaments, and a new bonnet adorned with a gay bunch of bright yellow auriculas. She was followed by Carrie, also more elaborately attired than usual with her.

"So there you are, Delia," exclaimed her mother. "We made sure you must have run off with Mr.

Cartmel." She smiled roguishly, as was her wont when delivering herself of some particularly daring sentiment.

"You have got here, then." Delia's voice was no less natural—and no more—than her husband's had been. "You are very early, surely."

"We started about an hour sooner than we need have done," explained Carrie. "You know what mother is. I found her dressed when I got back from the City at half-past one. And she never sat down again until I was ready."

"But how did you get in?" asked Stephen, feeling that he must speak, or choke.

"We found the door open—and nobody in the place. We rang several times, and at last John said he would come in."

"I told you that you ought to knock," said Mrs. Reynolds severely. "But neither of them ever pay the slightest attention to anything I say, Mr. Cartmel."

"I am delighted that you have got here," said Stephen, with creditable cordiality.

"But we are quite the first," complained Mrs. Reynolds. "I remember my dear husband used to say that it was just as bad to be too early as too late, when you were asked anywhere. It is always trying to be taken unawares. I daresay, if the truth be known, we interrupted Mr. Cartmel before he was quite finished with Delia."

The tension was getting unendurable. "Not at all," Stephen forced himself to say. "The picture is quite finished now. Would you like to see it?"

"I am afraid that Delia and I will have to go now." John Blacklock had quite recovered command over

his voice. "We have a most important engagement that we must keep."

"An engagement, John?" Mrs. Reynolds did not conceal her surprise. "Why, you have only just come?"

"I did not know of it until a short time ago. Come, Delia."

"But how soon will you get back?"

"I can't say, exactly. If we should be kept, Carrie will be quite able to see you safely home. Come, Delia."

For a moment Stephen thought that she was going to refuse. He did not dare look at her, but he could hear the quick sobbing of her breath. He heard her voice, very calm, "Au revoir, Mr. Cartmel," and wondered if the audacity were intentional. "Take care of mother, Carrie," she said again, and was gone.

How very odd of John to have said nothing about this engagement beforehand," marvelled Mrs. Reynolds.

"I expect it is something to do with his business," said Carrie. "I thought he looked rather worried about something."

"This is the painting." Stephen wheeled the easel towards the centre of the room. "I hope you think it's a good likeness."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FOR once in a way Mr. Skillet was absolutely silenced: not that he lacked words, but that listeners were denied him. And just as sound needs the help of an eardrum before it becomes audible, so Mr. Skillet could talk only before an attentive audience. An audience he had, but its attention—even including that of his own wife—was entirely given to Mr. Babbacombe. Mr. Babbacombe was a tall, thin, pale young gentleman with a profusion of hair. He sat upon the edge of his chair crouching forward, his arms pressed under his thighs, his hands gripping his ankles, his body swaying rhythmically from side to side. He was a writer of rising repute, and his conversation was modelled upon his writings. Mr. Skillet, who had never met him before, had spent most of the afternoon in posing to attract his attention, drawing always closer to him, as might a leopard track down a gazelle. But no sooner had he made his final spring, which took the form of his favourite thesis—that the Artist is superior to the ordinary laws of morality—than he found that the positions were reversed so that his quarry there and then devoured him. He began by stating, in a gentle voice that was like a sigh, but in plain English, that Mr. Skillet did not know what he was talking about. Having demolished Mr. Skillet with this first thrust, he raised his voice the least bit in the world and waited until those within earshot of him were silent.

“Art, on the contrary,” he sighed, “is Virtue. It is more than Virtue: it is God.” He smiled gently at a young lady in a mediæval costume which fitted her body almost as closely as her skin, who was gazing at him with yearning rapture. Mr. Babbacombe was accustomed to a train of young lady worshippers and gained strength from their contemplation, as did Antæus from contact with the earth. “The idea which the ignorant have fitted with a personality and called God, is only another name for Art. It is the ultimate expression of humanity. It is the manifestation of the human ideal.”

“Seem to have heard something like that before,” grumbled Mr. Skillet, but he could not seduce the attention of a single young lady, and so lapsed into silence once more.

“If you ask me for a definition of the highest point to which Art can attain, I would take you by the hand and lead you to where a young mother was suckling her child.”

He released one of his ankles for a moment, in order that he might pass a long, thin hand over his hair, and smiled at Mrs. Skillet encouragingly. Several young ladies gave little gasps of dismay and a very young gentleman blushed painfully.

“Surely, Mr. Babbacombe,” protested the young lady in the close-fitting robes, “that is Nature rather than Art?”

She spoke with deference, and Mr. Babbacombe rewarded her with a favouring smile, as though he were not sorry that the point had been raised.

“It is the starting-point of either; it is the common goal of both. It completes the glorious Trinity by

which the destiny of man is formulated. It is Beauty; it is Worth; it is Art. And it is Nature."

He paused for possible comment, but no one spoke. Only the young lady with the skin-tight costume sighed deeply, being for the time the leader of Mr. Babbacombe's chorus.

"Is it possible to conceive a more inartistic anticlimax than a childless woman?" he mused. "I do not think so, unless it be a childless man."

Mr. Skillet attempted another mutiny.

"I don't myself see what all that has to do with the original question."

"Everything. The Home is the highest expression of human art—the central point around which every branch of human effort ultimately revolves. Morality is the bulwark by which human wisdom safeguards the Home. Who sins against Morality sins against Art. No man can be a true artist who has not been a father; who has not dedicated his effort upon the altar of the Home. Without it, his art must always be incomplete, indefinite, without finality."

Claire drew Stephen aside. "Who is that extraordinary young man?" she whispered.

"That? Oh, that's only Babbacombe. He is one of the leaders of the Domesticists. Haven't you heard of them? Babbacombe used to be a minor poet—wrote erotic sonnets and that sort of thing. But I suppose it didn't pay, or else he got married or something. Now he has taken up the cult of the Child—and is doing uncommonly well out of it. He's brought out half a dozen volumes of neo-nursery rhymes already, and he is editing a new edition of 'Sandford and Merton.' He's got a regular tail of young women al-

ways at his heels, and he talks to them about his babies. They used to worship him just as much when he was on the erotic lay. Process of evolution I suppose."

Mr. Babbacombe was warming to his subject. "I have often surprised myself in tears—I suppose no man who has within him the true instinct of the artist but has wept that he is not a woman. That to him is denied the crowning privilege of motherhood, the rapturous bliss of child-bearing."

The chorus of young ladies followed the example of their leader and sighed deeply. The very young gentleman turned the colour of a peony and gazed modestly at the carpet.

Stephen's duties as host led him to another corner of the room. Here he was button-holed unexpectedly by a stout gentleman with a shiny bald head, Mr. Lostwithiel by name, who was a director of insurance companies by profession, and a water-colour painter by inclination. He was arguing with great energy, his opponent being a young-old lady with pince-nez and a resigned attitude, who contributed advice on affairs of the heart to one of the women's weeklies, under the pseudonym of "Lady Norah."

"A moment, Cartmel." Stephen gazed apprehensively towards the lady whose replenished tea-cup he was carrying, but decided that escape was hopeless, the more so that Mr. Lostwithiel was purchaser of pictures as well as painter. "I want to ask you a question. What proportion of your guests would you estimate to be suffering from secret, mortal ailments?"

"Upon my word, I haven't the faintest idea. None at all, I hope."

"You are as bad as Miss Prittlewell. The fact is that you both judge solely from their expressions at the present moment, without bringing experience to your aid. Now I can assure you, speaking as an expert, that nearly a quarter—twenty-one and a half per cent. to be exact—are suffering from organic diseases of some kind or another, many of them in an acute form. They don't know it themselves, in most cases. But it is so."

"You are evading the real issue," protested Miss Prittlewell, unconsciously plagiarising Mr. Skillet. "What you said first was that, under a mask of gaiety, they were secretly enduring tortures, either mental or physical."

"And so they are," maintained Mr. Lostwithiel stoutly. He was interrupted by a peal of shrill laughter coming from a little to the left of where they were standing. A very stout gentleman, with the features of a Brobdignagian child, was laughing at a joke he had just made, his whole body quivering with the extremity of his mirth.

"It doesn't sound as if there was much secret sorrow about Burnaby, at any rate," commented Cartmel, carefully balancing the tea-cup.

"Don't you be too sure about that. His jollity is all pose. The man is just eaten up with jealousy, because Montague Blackwell has got a bigger vogue than he has for the same sort of piffle, ever since 'The Longbow Man' came out. But take another example nearer home. Take yourself. Can you lay your hand on your heart and say that you haven't got a secret skeleton tucked away in some cupboard, that comes out and rattles its bones at you in the wee sma' hours of the

morning? If you haven't, you're a lucky man, that's all I can say."

"I've got a whole charnel-house full of them," replied Stephen gaily. "And one of them is that if I don't give this cup of tea to Mrs. Larkin before it gets cold, she'll never speak to me again."

"You chose a bad example," insisted Miss Prittlewell, gazing after Stephen with an air of sentimental interest. "If ever there was a happy young man it is Mr. Cartmel. That reminds me, do you know which is the girl he's engaged to? She is enormously rich, I am told."

Although the room was now rapidly thinning, Mr. Babbacombe's retinue still surrounded him. "Whenever I am at a loss for an idea," he was saying, "I have them both brought to me and listen to them as they play."

"But doesn't it disturb you when they cry?" asked a rash young lady.

He regarded her with gentle pain. "Cry? There is inspiration in their every note. Their voices are like the sighing of the south winds among the strings of a golden lute. That is why I call the one Dulcimer and the other Althea. I am hoping that the next will be a boy. I shall call him Chrysostom, or the Golden-mouthed."

Carrie and her mother came to make their adieux. "I don't think we had better wait any longer. Something must have kept John and Delia. And it is bad for mother to be out too late at this time of year. You will tell them that we have gone on, won't you? Good-bye, and thank you so much."

Stephen, who had been secretly longing for their

departure, made no effort to detain them. All through the afternoon he had been haunted by the fantastic idea that John Blacklock would return and denounce him in the presence of his guests. His mind was now more at ease upon this point; instead, he was exercising his imagination as to what form the sequel of the discovery was likely to take. Whatever it might be, he did not want the old lady to be mixed up in it. It would be bad enough to have to face John Blacklock by himself.

He was even more anxious for the departure of Claire and Lady Stanmore. It had become evident to him that he had forfeited all right to Claire's love and that he must offer to release her from her engagement at the earliest possible moment. He dreaded the prospect of being alone with her even more than he did with Blacklock. It would be bad enough to make his clean breast with her, when he knew what steps he would have to take to safeguard Delia. He was perfectly well aware of the old-fashioned, strait-laced idea as to the holiness of marriage which her husband held; it was more than probable that Blacklock would refuse to have anything more to do with his wife. In that case, the only thing to be done would be to marry her himself as soon as the necessary legal preliminaries could be got through. On the other hand, there might be a reconciliation and forgiveness, for there was no doubt about the strength of Blacklock's love for Delia. In any case, Claire must be told; but not before she could be told everything. Until then, it was torture to speak to her, and purgatory to see the look of affection with which she followed every movement of her unworthy lover.

As it happened, the Stanmores could not stay late, having an early dinner engagement, for which they had to drive a considerable distance.

"It has been perfectly delightful," cried Claire as she wished him farewell. "Everything went off splendidly. I have only one thing to find fault with, and that is that I haven't seen the pretty Mrs. Blaicklock. You promised to show her to me to-day. I believe you have hidden her away somewhere because you were afraid I should be jealous. I expect I should be, too, if she is anything like her portrait. It is really wonderful, dear. Far and away the finest thing you have ever done."

"If we haven't seen the beauty, her mother was an excellent substitute," added Lady Stanmore. "I had quite a long chat with her. She was feeling rather out of it, I think—and I am sure I don't wonder—among some of the strange creatures you had collected. We became quite confidential, and she told me all about her children, and what a paragon of a son-in-law she has, and how devoted her daughter is to him. She wanted to know——" Lady Stanmore smiled reminiscently, "if we weren't related to some Stanmores who used to keep the principal draper's shop at some town in Gloucestershire where she used to live. And she advised me to always make your father wear a red flannel underwaistcoat in the winter and promised to send me a paper pattern to cut it out by. She told me a great deal about you, Stephen, too, but it would only make you more conceited if I told it you. Really, I quite enjoyed talking to her: she was so motherly and she had such a pleasant smile. The daughter ought to be as nice as she is pretty if she takes after her mother.

Well, we shall see you to lunch, I suppose, to-morrow. My husband particularly wants to see you—to ask your advice about a house he is thinking of buying.”

She smiled significantly, and Claire pointed the suggestion with a happy blush.

With their going began a general exodus, as though according to precedent, the company generally had been waiting for some one to give them the lead. Mr. Babbacombe departed, with two of his worshippers, in a hansom, they having expressed a yearning desire to be introduced to Dulcimer and Althea without delay. Miss Prittlewell departed, with an idea for an answer to a supposititious correspondent upon the best way for ensuring wedded bliss, suggested by the way Stephen and Claire had shaken hands in parting. Mr. Lostwithiel departed, after having taxed Stephen with a secret tendency towards bilious dyspepsia. Mr. Burnaby departed, shaking all over with unconcealed merriment at his latest witticism. Mr. Skillet departed with his wife, in haughty gloom, about the same time as did Mr. Babbacombe, after whose cab he gazed with marked unfriendliness.

It was after half-past five before the last of them was gone and Stephen might consider his purgatory at an end. It was true that he must now expect to look his gloomiest anticipations in the face, but that, at least, was better than the necessity of appearing at his easiest; of talking and laughing to all and sundry in his most light-hearted manner! above all, of keeping an unwinking watch upon his own expression and the modulations of his voice, lest they should not ring true and he should betray himself to Claire by his own efforts to convince her.

He dismissed the two maids, rewarding them handsomely for their services, and telling them not to trouble about washing up, as his own man would attend to that upon his return. Not until the door had closed upon them did he feel himself once more his own master, free to lay aside the mask, ready to face whatever might be in store for him so long as he might but face it without witnesses. One thing only he prayed for; that whatever form it might take, he should not be kept too long in suspense. He might hear nothing more that evening: it was even probable that such would be the case; if so, it would be impossible for him to face the Stanmore family at lunch next day; he must find some excuse for avoiding them until——

He had not been alone for five minutes when there came a quick knocking at the outer door. It had come, then, whatever it was. Before he could answer, the knocking was repeated, single strokes, following rapidly upon one another, as though the caller were in urgent haste. Before he could get the door fully open Delia had slipped past him into the studio.

He had been sitting in the dark, or with only such feeble light as came in through the skylight. He switched on one of the electric-lights and gazed at his unexpected visitor wonderingly. This was certainly the last thing he had looked—or hoped for.

There was no longer any pretence of calmness or dignity about her. She was trembling violently, her eyes were red with tears, her face, even her lips, were deadly pale. The trim neatness which usually characterised her—one of the qualities in her which had first captivated the fastidious mind of Stephen—was wanting, her veil was torn, her hat was set on her

head at random, long tendrils of her hair had escaped from their orderly restraint and clung about her cheeks.

"You must take care of me. You must take care of me. You must take care of me now," she kept repeating, as though it were a charm which gave her courage.

"What has happened?"

"He will kill me. He is following me now. He may be here at any moment. Oh, you must take care of me. I have nobody but you now."

"You are quite safe with me. Nobody can hurt you—surely you know that?"

"You must take care of me now. I am frightened." She collapsed suddenly upon the nearest chair. He hurried to fetch her a glass of water. It revived her and helped her to regain her self-control.

"I am better now. I was so frightened. I was afraid that I might not find you. I don't know what I should have done then."

He inwardly thanked Heaven that she had not arrived a quarter of an hour earlier. "Do you think you could tell me now what has frightened you so?" he asked her gently.

"He means to kill me. I know he does. I could see it in his face, when we were in the cab. You must take me away at once, somewhere where he can never find me."

"But what did he do? What did he say?"

"He never said a single word to me. Not all the way home. He just called a hansom, and we drove all the way back to Tooting. And—oh! I could see his face—in the little looking-glass. It was terrible. He

never said anything when we got to the house and I ran up to my bedroom and locked myself in because I was afraid. And I cried. I lay on my bed and waited. He was just like he was, that first night you came, with the cabman. I saw his face. And—oh! I got more and more frightened. He came and tried the handle once, and called me. I didn't answer. I was frightened. And he went away. And—oh! at last, after I had waited a long time, I got terrified, because I couldn't hear what he was doing. I went to the door and listened, and I couldn't hear anything. And I opened it and went to the head of the stairs, and I couldn't hear a sound: not even the servants. I knew he had sent them out of the house—before——”

She broke off, trembling violently. He tried to reassure her. “There is nothing to be frightened about now. And—you can only have fancied—— He isn't that sort of man at all.”

“Oh, you don't know him as well as I do. He has the most terrible temper, really. I know it; I have seen him struggling against it, often. I know he means to kill me. You will take me away, Harry, now, won't you, dear?”

“Yes, yes; you are safe with me. But how did you get here?”

“I got more and more frightened, everything was so quiet. And—oh! at last, I couldn't stand it any more. I should have gone mad. I locked the door again and I got out of the window. Yes. It looks on to the back, you know, and there is a roof below that comes out over the breakfast room. I let myself down into the garden, and I crept round by the side and into the street. I didn't mind then—so much—if he did

kill me. But it was so dreadful, in that room, all by myself—and him. But nobody saw me, and I found a cab and came straight here. You must take me away at once. It will have made him a hundred times worse—my having come back to you. Harry, dear Harry, you will take me, won't you? Oh, I beg you, I beg you. You said you loved me, Harry; you won't fail me now—when I want you so much.”

She caught at his hand and tried to throw herself upon her knees before him. He felt that she must recover her self-control at all hazards, and that there was only one way of helping her to do so. He drew her up towards him and held her in his arms. She nestled to him like a weary, frightened child, and the sound of her sobbing ceased.

He must do something at once: that was abundantly evident. And the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that there was only one thing to be done. He could not turn her out into the street. He could not wait there with her until her husband should come in search of her. He did not believe for a moment that John Blacklock had had the smallest intention of killing her: that was a fantasy born of her terror. But he was a man of violent temper—had been famous for it even as a boy at school: that she should have seized the first opportunity of seeking refuge from him, in the arms of her lover, would certainly not have the effect of calming him. If he found her at the studio—the first place he would be likely to come to—there must be a hideous scene. That was of comparatively small importance, but what was to follow it? She would be dragged away, terrified, and calling upon her lover for help. What could she expect from

her husband afterwards? Again, he—Stephen—had got her into this trouble; the responsibility was altogether his; he could not desert her now. He had made his own bed, and he must lie upon it. As to what the consequences would be—well, this was not the time to dwell upon them.

“You will take me away somewhere, at once. You will, Harry, you will?”

“Yes, little one. We will go at once. Now you must try and be calm, won’t you?”

“At once? This very instant? He will be here at any moment. I wonder he has not come already.”

“He would not be likely to discover that you had gone at once. We have plenty of time still. Will you sit down there, for a moment, while I get one or two things ready? I won’t keep you a minute. And we must both think—exactly what we are to do. You will have to be brave, my poor little one.”

“Yes, yes; I will be brave. I don’t feel frightened any more, now that I have you to take care of me. Only be quick.”

Within ten minutes he was ready. He had changed his clothes—choosing an inconspicuous suit of tweed—and hastily threw some things together in a kit-bag. Coming down to the studio again, he wrote a hurried note to Adam that he should be away for some time, but would later send particulars of his movements.

“You, of course, have nothing but what you stand in,” he said thoughtfully.

“I shan’t bring you much of a fortune, dear,” she answered, with a watery little smile. “I brought this long cloak with me, though, in case we should have a long night-journey. And one or two things in my

dressing-bag. I wanted to have a photograph of mother, because I shall never see her again."

"We had better go out the back way. Not that there is any one to see us. If you go first, I will turn the light off."

"You do love me, Harry, with all your heart? And you always will, even though I am such a trouble to you?" She did not wait for an answer, but preceded him to the door. He cast one look round the room, wondering if he would ever enter it again, and followed her out into the darkness.

Stephen had decided, on the spur of the moment, to make for Paris. She agreed, as she would have agreed to anything he might propose. She was exhausted with the remembrance of her terrors and clung to him with the docility of a child. They found a cab, with little delay, and ordered the man to drive his fastest to Victoria.

"So far so good," said Stephen, in his most matter-of-fact voice. "No one has seen us, and no one is likely to, on a night like this"; for it was raining heavily and the streets were obscured with thick mist. He pushed up the little trap and called to the driver: "Better keep along the main road."

"Quickest way is through Eaton Square, sir."

"I know. But I don't want to go that way."

Neither of them had noticed the dark figure, effacing itself in the shadow of the public-house wall, which watched them as they entered the cab and listened eagerly to the directions Stephen gave to the driver.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LESS than ten minutes after Stephen and Delia had driven off towards Victoria, another hansom came rapidly across Battersea Bridge, into the King's Road, and so to the corner of Rodney Street. There John Blacklock descended and walked rapidly down the street to the studio. There was no light in the windows; he knocked and waited, but no answer came. The place was empty and deserted: that was evident. He had no idea what to do next; his whole mind had been concentrated on following Delia; he felt sure she must have come hither, if only for the reason that she could have gone nowhere else. She happened to have mentioned, only that morning, that she had run short of money and he had given her some loose silver, anticipating the usual house-keeping cheque; it was obvious, therefore, that she could not have gone to an hotel. He had a faint hope that she might have sought shelter at some friend's house, but it was of the faintest: she had so few intimates, for one thing. He had been so sure of finding her with Cartmel that he had scarcely considered what course to pursue if he did not. He knocked again, and again waited. It occurred to him that he might have been expected and that they had purposely turned off the lights in order to deceive him. He put his ear to the letter-box and listened. Everything within was quiet as the grave.

He was on the point of going round to the back to

see if he could force an entrance, when a familiar figure came towards him from the main thoroughfare. As it passed a lamp-post the light fell upon a face of ebony. It was Stephen's servant. He, at least, would have a key.

Adam was walking at a fair pace, and holding himself stiffly upright. There was, in fact, nothing unusual in his appearance, except that his expression was of almost funereal solemnity. "Is it you, Adam? Do you know if your master is in?"

Adam passed his interlocutor, who had advanced a few paces to meet him, without taking the slightest notice of him, or even seeming aware of his presence.

"It is you, isn't it, Adam?" he repeated, thinking it possible that in the darkness he had made some mistake. "I am Mr. Blaicklock." Still the negro ignored him absolutely. He noticed a strong smell of alcoholic liquor of some kind and realised dimly the meaning of it all. Adam stopped at the proper door, produced a latch-key, and fumbled at the lock. His hand was perceptibly unsteady, but, after several attempts, he got the door open. Before he could close it, John Blaicklock had passed him, without his seeming in any way aware of the circumstances. Even when the intruder switched on the electric light, he displayed no consciousness of anything unusual. Instead, he walked straight into the other studio and so to the corresponding kitchen, which served him as a bedroom. Into this he disappeared, to be seen no more. John Blaicklock, meanwhile, addressed him twice, and once shook him gently, without producing the slightest response. When a few minutes later he opened the

kitchen door and looked in, Adam was in bed, his clothes neatly arranged on a chair at the bed-foot.

With the problem of effecting an entry thus satisfactorily settled, Blaicklock set himself to search the studio. The first thing that gave him any clue was the letter, addressed to Adam, which was lying on the table. He opened and read it without hesitation. They were gone, then. Later he came upon a little handkerchief, crumpled into a ball and wet with tears. He straightened it out and looked at the initials. It was Delia's. He closed his eyes and laid his hand upon the table for support. When he had recovered himself, he folded the handkerchief carefully and placed it in his pocket.

He knew the worst, now, but still he was no nearer finding out where they had gone. He searched about, hoping to find a railway-guide, perhaps opened at some page which might give him some clue; but he found none. He did not hesitate to open the writing-desk and even searched the ostensibly secret drawer, which, being in the position in which "secret" drawers are always arranged in desks of a certain type, was easily enough found. It was empty, save for a blank envelope. He tore it open. It contained one of the fifty-pound notes he had given Stephen earlier in the day. He went up into Stephen's bedroom and roused high and low, finding nothing whatever to the purpose. It was at least evident that their flight had been hurried, and unpremeditated; Stephen's clothes were flung about the floor at random, as though he had turned them over in violent haste, hesitating what to take and what to leave behind.

He had descended to the studio again, uncertain

what to do next, when there came a knocking at the outer door. Could they have returned? He hastened to open it. It was only Mr. Skillet.

Mr. Skillet was not a little taken aback at finding himself admitted by a total stranger. "Is Mr. Cartmel's servant anywhere about?" he asked. "I want to see him for a moment, if possible."

"Mr. Cartmel isn't in. I am anxious to see him myself. His black servant let me in, but he is hopelessly drunk and could give me no information. My name is Blaicklock."

"Oh, of course; I've often heard him speak of you. You are the man whose wife's portrait he's painting, aren't you? Well, then, as we are mutual friends, I can tell you, in confidence of course, that I know Cartmel isn't in here." He chuckled, in the unhealthy way men chuckle when they scent an impropriety. "As a matter of fact, I saw him about twenty minutes ago driving into Victoria Station with an uncommonly pretty girl in tow. As she wasn't Miss Stanmore, I daresay he wouldn't want it generally mentioned. But you were at school together, weren't you? Only, if you do chip him about it, don't ever let him know where you got it from."

It is possible that Mr. Skillet read in the other's face something which made him regret that he had spoken, though he was of the type of man who can never refrain from telling a story at the expense of a friend, no matter what may be the consequences. At least, he now made haste to change the subject. "Fact of the matter is, I took away the wrong umbrella by mistake just now. It's really a better one than my own was, but that was a Christmas present from my wife,

and you know what women are. I shouldn't care to go back to her——. Hullo! what the devil's become of the chap?" For John Blacklock had disappeared while he was speaking, and was by then half-way to the King's Road.

At Victoria he had not much difficulty in getting upon the track of the fugitives, both of whom were too noticeable in appearance to have escaped comment. By the aid of a liberal distribution of silver, he learned in a short time that they had arrived in a hansom with but little luggage; that Stephen had made inquiries about the boat-train to Paris, by way of Newhaven, and had seemed disappointed on learning that he had still some two hours to wait for it; that he had consulted his companion, and that they had finally left by the 6.50, which also went to Newhaven. They had been gone, as it appeared by this, only some ten minutes before their pursuer arrived at Victoria. He had no difficulty in arriving at the correct deduction—that they had preferred to spend the two hours of necessary delay at Newhaven rather than face the risk of remaining in London.

Having discovered so much, John Blacklock now found himself confronted with a greater difficulty. There proved to be no other train for Newhaven until past nine o'clock, when the boat-express was timed to leave. It was out of the question to wait for that. They might not be intending to cross to Paris at all that night; they might, indeed, have gone as far as Newhaven only as a blind; they might not have gone as far as Newhaven at all—though he had ascertained that they had booked to that station—but have alighted at Lewes—the only other stopping-point of their train

—and doubled back or made away across country. The loss of two hours might make all the difference to his chance of finding them.

His mind was soon made up; he asked to be taken to the station-master and ordered a special train. His mind recoiled at the expense, but this was not the time to quibble over a few pounds more or less.

To order a special train was one thing; to obtain it, was another. He was taken from one high official to another, being received with various degrees of incredulity; for his appearance, never of the most aristocratic, was by this time not such as to inspire confidence. In his haste to follow Delia he had not thought of an overcoat; he had not even taken a pair of gloves, and, instead of a hat, he was wearing a brightly coloured cloth cap which was not at all becoming. In the end it was made clear to him, with no more beating about the bush than is inherent to the railway-official method, that he could not have a special train provided for him unless he deposited the full charges in advance. Here was an obstacle indeed; he had not thought to provide himself with any extra money, not expecting to need it; he had perhaps thirty shillings in change about him; all banks were long since closed; if he went in search of money there was extremely little chance of his being able to lay hands upon it at that hour, while he would be wasting precious moments in so doing. He offered a cheque, but the suggestion was received unfavourably. He put his hand into his breast pocket to find his handkerchief, meaning to wipe his forehead. His fingers closed on a piece of paper which crackled at his touch. He drew it out and looked at it. It was a fifty-pound note. He re-

316 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

garded it blankly for a moment: then he remembered. It must be the note which he had found in the secret drawer of Stephen's desk. In his haste and agitation he must have forgotten to put it back. He felt some scruple as to using it. As an honourable man he had no right to it. It was not his. On the other hand, Stephen certainly was some forty pounds in his debt. Stephen—he still thought of him as Stephen—was using money that came from his pocket in his flight; there would be even a certain appropriateness in tracking him down with money that came from his own. He offered the note to the high official without further hesitation. The high official took it, looked at it doubtfully, looked at him doubtfully, called another high official into consultation; last of all accepted the note and the situation, and bade him sit down by the fire while the "special" was got ready for him. He waited, for minutes that seemed hours, torturing himself with speculations as to what the fugitives were doing in the meantime. Even now he had no clear idea what he should do when he came up with them. To find them—that was the one end upon which all his being was concentrated.

At last, when he had reached the farthest limits of endurance, he was told to follow the high official and taken to a remote part of the station, where an engine, with one saloon-carriage and a guard's van, was waiting fussily by the side of a lonely platform. He wondered at the presence of the brake-van, but decided it must be to assist in keeping the equilibrium of the train. This at least indicated that he might expect high speed. The high official, who seemed designed by nature to act as wet blanket to his hopes, explained

that he must expect some delay until the busy section of the line was passed, and so departed, still very obviously marvelling at the conjunction of cloth cap and frock coat. He looked at his watch. It was close upon eight. The fugitives had approximately an hour's start.

They, meanwhile, were approaching Lewes, in happy unconsciousness of pursuit. As was usual with him, Stephen, once the plunge was taken, had rapidly resigned himself to it. He could honestly tell himself that it was not his fault that things had turned out as they had: the responsibility was entirely with Fate—and Fate's shoulders were stronger than his. Fate had chosen to start him upon a new life, with a hundred pounds in his pocket and a most desirable companion; the obvious thing to do was to make the best of it. As long as he had Delia's eyes to look into, it was as impossible, as it would have been useless, to regret anything. The present was his, the future must take care of itself. If only—but he certainly must not let his thoughts approach Claire Stanmore.

Delia, for her part, was radiantly happy. Her fears dropped away from her as fast as they left London behind them. Even more than her companion she had cast away from her alike the past and the future, and lived only in the present. The thought that Stephen's arms were round her, that she would be with him always in the future, that there need be no more clandestine meetings and waitings, pregnant with the dread of discovery; that he was now and for all time her very, very own, as she was his—there was no room for anything else in her heart. Doubts she had none. That she had placed herself, as it were, at his mercy;

that her only possibility of future happiness—even of life, as she knew it—depended on his constancy—well, had she not the power almost of life and death over him? Was not their very flight, with all the sacrifices it must entail upon him, proof of her sway? She hoped everything; she regretted nothing. If only—but she must certainly not let her thoughts approach John Blaicklock.

It was noticeable—though neither of them noticed it—that, even in the short space which had elapsed since they left the studio, something of a new spirit had entered their relationship. It showed itself chiefly in Delia, though in Stephen also there was a new suggestion of protective tenderness, almost of gravity, hitherto foreign to his nature. As to Delia, since her outburst of terror in the studio she seemed to have forgotten all her coquetry. She was no longer the pretty tyrant, exercising irresponsible power over her lover for the mere pleasure of exacting his obedience. She treated him no longer as though he were her slave; almost, indeed, as though he had become her master; agreeing to all he wished or suggested, for the mere pleasure of obeying him. It seemed, too, as though she had now definitely cast aside the control which she had hitherto exercised over her feelings. Where she had before arbitrarily refused his caresses or made him sue for them in abject humility, she now herself lavished kisses upon him; where she had once commanded him to tell her how much he loved her, she now protested how dear he was to her; the eyes, that had mocked his passion, no longer hesitated to return it.

They reached Newhaven at half-past eight, and

found they would have to pass another two hours and a quarter before the boat for Dieppe was due to start. Stephen suggested that it would be a good idea to get something to eat; Delia agreed, as she would have agreed if he had suggested going for a swim. They left their meagre luggage at the station, and walked gaily off in search of an hotel, not wishing to court the publicity of the station refreshment room. It was a glorious night; the moon was full, and the stiff breeze was driving great fragments of snowy cloud helter-skelter across the starry heavens. They walked, as children might, hand in hand, and like children gazed together into the future with glad, expectant eyes.

Half an hour after they had left the station a special train slowed down beside the platform. From it descended a man in a frock coat and a cloth cap of bright colour, which were not in keeping. The porter who held the door open for him noticed that his sandy hair was inclining to grey. Certainly his was not a figure to excite sympathy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“It is almost time we thought of getting back to the station, little one. We have some way to go, and it wouldn’t do to miss the boat.”

“If you think so, dearest. But I am so happy here—so very happy. I should like to stay here for ever and ever.”

They were sitting, very close together, on a break-water jutting across the beach from the long sea-wall. The tide was up; the whole world was full of the mystery of sea-voices; a great wake of heaving silver, cast by the moon, trembled across the waves almost to their feet. They were in absolute solitude, cut off from England by the high sea-wall behind them, with no nearer traces of mankind than the lights of New-haven and of Seaford, glinting through the gloom to right and left of them. She was nestling her head upon his shoulder, her face turned up to catch the bluff kisses of the sea-wind.

“I wish we could stay like this for ever and ever,” she said again. As she spoke she rose to her feet and stood beside him, leaning out against the wind. “We ought to be very grateful to that servant of yours,” she said suddenly. “If she hadn’t gone out and left the door open, I suppose we shouldn’t be here now.”

He laughed, without a trace of regret. “She found I had only one cream-jug. Said she didn’t like to disturb me, as I had a lady sitting to me, and thought she

would just slip out to her mistress's house—it is only just round the corner from Rodney Street—and fetch a couple. We really ought to be grateful to Mrs. Talbot Ironsides for having such a thoughtful housemaid."

"I wonder what she would have to say about it, if she knew," Delia meditated. "That it was all through the direct intervention of the devil, I suppose. You don't think so, Harry, do you? You won't ever think so, will you?"

"You will have to help me to get to the top," she said a little later, when they had scrambled back along the slippery sea-worn timbers of the breakwater, to where the smooth stones of the sea-wall rose above it.

He vaulted to the top, not unwilling to display his agility, and assisted her to follow. They set off towards where the distant lights of Newhaven twinkled before them, helping each other to battle against the rising strength of the wind. "Looks as if we were going to have a rough passage," he shouted.

"Perhaps it is the last despairing effort of the evil spirits that have been struggling all this time to keep us apart," she replied, also at her loudest; "but our love has beaten them now, and they know it. Nothing can ever part us now, can it, Harry?"

"Isn't it astonishingly lonely," she said, when they had gone some distance farther. "We haven't met a single soul since we left Newhaven."

They were passing a lonely group of houses that stood huddled together a little landwards from the sea-wall, looking very dark and mysterious in the cloud-swept moonlight.

"As a matter of fact there is one man coming along

towards us now. Can't you see him? there—he looks like a black speck—right in front of us.”

“Harry! What if it should be——?”

“Not a bit of it. It's one of the hardy mariners from hereabouts. A bit late in getting back from the public-house. You *are* a goose.”

They bent their heads against the wind and pushed onwards.

A dark cloud which had obscured the moon glided from off it as they came up with the man they had seen approaching them and the moonlight fell suddenly athwart his face. Delia, recognising her husband, stopped as though he had struck her in the face. Then, as the two men faced each other, she threw herself in front of Stephen, as though protecting him. “It was my fault, John,” she cried. “You mustn't blame him. It was altogether my fault.”

Whatever his impulse at seeing them thus, John Blaicklock restrained it marvellously. He stood motionless, the wind sporting with the tails of his frock coat—an unheroic figure enough in the moonshine, yet not without its dignity.

It seemed ages to Stephen, waiting, before the other man spoke. For his own part, he could say nothing: there was, indeed, nothing to be said.

At last, John Blaicklock spoke. “I have come to take you home, Delia.”

Stephen feared that Delia was going to lose her self-control, to scream, perhaps to call on him to protect her. If so, certainly there could be no more fitting place for a tragedy than this lonely causeway facing the groaning tide. But her husband's self-command seemed to communicate itself to her.

"I am sorry, John, but I cannot come with you. I—it would be wicked, feeling as I do. It was wrong of you to come after me. You must have known that—after—I should never come back to you."

Stephen, standing to leeward of her, caught every word. He wondered how much of what she said could have reached her husband's ears. Perhaps the expression of her face told him all that he needed to be told. At least, he was about to speak when she prevented him.

"We love each other," she went on, gaining confidence as she spoke. "We have loved each other—from the very beginning. I am very sorry—very sorry that you should have had such a—a wicked woman as I am for your wife. But you must not blame Mr. Cartmel. I made him take me away because I could not bear to—to be such a hypocrite when you were so good to me. He would never have done it if I had not made him. I am altogether to blame."

"I have not come to blame either of you. I have come to take you home again—for your own sake. You do not realise—either of you—what you are doing. You do not understand what it will lead to. I am as much to blame as you—for not having foreseen this; but I should be still more to blame if I allowed you——"

He did not finish the sentence. Stephen, watching him intently, might have thought him absolutely unmoved, so level were the tones of his voice, had it not been for the tension of his hands. He was holding them before him, the wrist of one gripped by the other, and as the moonlight fell upon them, every sinew showed itself rigid almost to the snapping point.

Delia stood facing him squarely, regarding him now without any outward sign of shame or fear. Her back was turned to Stephen, and she was so close before him that the skirts of her dress were blown against him by the wind. It annoyed him, at first, to believe that both of them regarded him almost as a spectator and confined all their attention to each other. Then, as he listened, a new reading of their attitude came to him. It was a contest of wills between the man and the woman—in which the man was the stronger, and knew it. Alone he would have conquered, but the very presence of Stephen was the disturbing influence which baffled him. Thus it was that he was trying to ignore Stephen, to carry on the contest as though he were non-existent; while Delia, on the other hand, was finding her reserve of strength in the knowledge that her lover was behind her. He felt that she was all the while mutely appealing to him to come to her assistance, to abate the concentration of her husband's purpose by his intervention. He sought eagerly for the opportunity.

“I am very sorry, John,” she insisted; “sorry for you—and for the others, but I can never come back now. It isn't as if it were only a sudden impulse. I have been meaning to—to leave you—ever since I found out that—how I felt towards him. I should have gone long before if—if—— I have thought it all out—over and over again—and I know what it means—to all of us, and what it may mean—for me. But it is better. Really and truly, John, it is better than the other would have been.”

Stephen suddenly felt ashamed. This was a new Delia, a more serious and stauncher Delia than he

had hitherto recognised. It was not in this spirit that he would have expected her to meet her husband—knowing how deeply she was wronging him. It was a different woman to the one who had crouched terror-stricken in the studio, entreating shelter from the anger of the man she now faced so undauntedly. Now the position was reversed—it was as though she was seeking to protect her lover from the consequences of that to which she had impelled him. The true Delia had never before been shown to him—perhaps not even to herself; it had needed the opportunity to force itself outwards to the light—and now the opportunity was come. The realisation only drove more home to him the knowledge of his own unworthiness. He must at least range himself beside her; he must say something. He moved from behind her, and so came nearer to John Blacklock.

“I want you to know,” he said, seeking in vain for some form of words which would not sound mere bathos in such circumstances, “that although I may seem to you to be playing the part of a blackguard——” The other man seemed as though he would have ignored the interruption. At first he kept his eyes fixed upon his wife. Suddenly he turned upon his supplanter, but there was no anger in his face—only a great weariness.

“I do not think you mean to play the part of a blackguard, Stephen. I have known you too long to believe—even now—that you would do so consciously. If I thought so, I should not have come here now—or I should have come in a different spirit. You have—you are contemplating doing me the greatest wrong that one man can do to another; but it is not because

—not altogether for my own sake that I have followed you. It is because I want—I want to save my wife—and to save you—from what you are about to do. We needn't think about—how it effects me personally. I—I suppose I am only reaping what I have sown. I know I—I am not the sort of a man that is likely to attract a woman's love. I—I—it was wrong of me—very wrong to think that I could make Delia——”

To any other form of attack Stephen could have formulated some sort of defence; but that this man—his old friend—knowing all that he knew, should stand there in grotesque humility and apologise for his existence—what could be said? If only he would have sprung at his throat, or lashed him with the outpouring of his contempt!

“I can see now that I have behaved cruelly, unfairly to—to the woman that I loved—that I love, so dearly.”

Delia's face was hidden from Stephen, but it seemed to him that she was crying. Evidently this form of reproach was as painful to her as to himself.

“But two blacks never yet made a white. Stephen, I know both your characters so well—I have known you ever since you were a little chap in knickerbockers—and I know that you are doing what is bound to end in hopeless misery for both of you. I don't mean only what you will have to give up, in the way of money and career. I don't suppose that would weigh with either of you. But, have you thought, Stephen, how long your—your present feelings are likely to endure?”

He seemed now to ignore Delia as totally as he had before ignored Stephen, keeping his eyes fixed upon

the young man's face, as though he was directing the whole agony of his soul towards him.

"When you were a little chap—I remember it even in your first term—you were always making sudden friendships and unmaking them the next week as suddenly as you had made them. And ever since then, whenever I have seen you, you have always been the same restless, changing nature—always wanting something new, getting tired of what you were used to. Why, I have even heard you say so about yourself. Have you thought what it would mean to Delia—if—I don't say it would happen—but supposing it did, with her? Stephen, don't expose my Delia to a risk like that. Don't do it, Stephen. If you love her—if you love her even a hundredth part as much as I do—spare her. I am only a very plain, unattractive man, and I never had any right to expect her to care for me. I haven't even been as good a husband as I ought—as I have meant to be. But—she is safe with me, Stephen. I shall never change. Perhaps I shall never be able to make her happy, but at least she will never know what it is to be miserable, and friendless, and alone. I don't mean to hurt you—I don't say that you will change—but, you know your own character as well—better than I can. And if you feel that there is even the chance of it, is it fair to her—is it possible for you—if you love her—to subject her to the risk of—you know of what?"

It seemed as though Delia was now feeling, as Stephen had felt before, that he needed the remembrance of her presence to make head against her husband's purpose. She seized the chance of interjection.

"What you say may be true, John, though I do

not believe that it is. I do not believe that Stephen is—what you are trying to make him out to be. But in any case, if there is such a change, such a risk, I have made up my mind to take it.”

He turned to her again, as though he realised instinctively that he were wiser to attack them apart rather than together.

“Have you thought, Delia, what it may mean to him? what, in any case, you are depriving him of? He is a young man, still, but he has already the certainty of a great career, if you do not take it away from him. He has success already assured; he has friends; he has everything that should make life happy to him; he has the consciousness of his own honour. You are going to take everything away from him at one blow; you are going to make his name a byword, so that his friends, or those of them who are most necessary to him, will pass him in the street as if he never existed. You are going to take away from him the one thing that helps a man onward: the knowledge that he can look his fate in the face, without shame. You are going to condemn him to endless remorse; for his is just the nature that will feel it—feel it bitterly, when he realises the dishonour which attaches—rightly—to his name—and yours. If you love him, Delia, surely you should spare him that. When you talk of loving a man, surely it means that you owe him something—something more than—than what you are helping him to do. Don't do it, Delia. If you won't make this sacrifice for your mother's sake—for you know what your shame would mean to her—or for your own sake, at least you should make it for his.”

Certainly the night was pregnant with surprises.

Here was a new John, no less startling to Stephen than the new Delia had been. The whole man was transformed; the genial, kindly City tradesman, with his whole-souled devotion to his business; his slow cautious speech; his prevalent suggestion, that the individual in him was subordinated to the type,—all was gone as if the sea-wind has blown it from him. Instead was a man whose every action and gesture, as he stood there in the moonlight, were those of inspiration; whose words came easily and fluently; whose appeal was the more impelling that it seemed to proceed from some power within him that was scarcely part of him. Even his earnestness seemed to affect him physically, giving him a new dignity, a new personality, that must have triumphed over his environment had he been tricked out in a jester's cap and bells. Most potent of all, in its effect upon Stephen, was the absolute single-mindedness of the man, his total forgetfulness of self, the earnestness with which he appealed, from the depths of his misery, to his faithless wife and treacherous friend to spare, not him, but themselves. It was not acting, it was not a cunningly thought-out plan of action; it needed but one look at his face to know that.

What more John Blaicklock might have said was never destined to be known, for, even as he was about to recommence, he was suddenly interrupted from an unexpected quarter.

The causeway upon which they were standing rose perhaps a dozen feet above the low land behind it, which it sheltered from the attacks of the sea. The moon was now about half-way between the horizon and the zenith, so that a broad path of shadow was

thrown across the fields behind. Out of this impenetrable blackness came suddenly a voice. All of them recognised it; it was unmistakably that of Mr. Manwell, and it rose, under the stress of uncontrollable excitement, to a shrill scream, coming almost undiminished across the wind.

“You wouldn’t believe me, when I told you. Now you know—ha—ha—now you know!”

As they turned, astounded by the unexpectedness of it, the face of Mr. Manwell, livid in the moonlight, appeared within a few feet of them, over the edge of the sea-wall. He was barely recognisable, so convulsed with mad excitement were his features, and he was crying out incoherently at Stephen.

Before they could do anything, or even consider what to do, he had regained some control over his voice, so that his words became comprehensible again.

“I told you what would happen, if you didn’t leave her alone. I warned you you should pay for it. I warned you.”

His right arm was by now resting on the top of the sea-wall. In the hand was something which glittered ominously. They did not at once realise its significance.

“Good God—he’s mad!” exclaimed John Blacklock.

“Take care, he means mischief.”

“I gave you fair warning,” shouted Mr. Manwell. “Now you are going to pay the penalty. You’ll roast in hell to-night! You’ll roast in hell! You’ll roast in hell!”

He raised his hand, supporting his elbow on the parapet, and fired the revolver which it held, point-

blank at Stephen. At the same moment came the sound of shouting from a little distance and two men appeared running rapidly towards the group.

Realising the madman's purpose, Delia, as he raised his hand, had thrown herself instinctively between him and Stephen. She might have spared herself the trouble, for, however excellent his intentions, Mr. Manwell's aim was defective. The bullet whistled harmlessly over their heads. But the end was not yet. Before the smoke had flown down the wind, he fired again. As before it was at Stephen that he aimed; it was John Blacklock who fell. Almost immediately afterwards the two men who had been running towards them reached the group.

For a moment there was silence. Then, with a scream, Delia threw herself upon the body of her husband.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE wounded man struggled to rise. "I'm all right," he muttered. "You needn't be alarmed, dearest. It's only a scratch."

Stephen, who had knelt beside him, was supporting his head. "Whereabouts did he hit you, old man?"

"Here. In the side. It's really only a scratch, I assure you," His head sank back against Stephen's knee. "I—shall—be—better—in—a—moment."

Of the two men who had joined the group, one was in the dress of a coast-guard, the other in the jersey and high boots of a fisherman.

"Hope the gen'leman's not badly hurt," said the first. "We couldn't get to you in time to warn you."

"What about t' madman?" inquired the fisherman, gazing over the moonlit flats.

"We'll attend to him in a minute. First thing to be done 's to see to the gen'leman's hurt. If you'll let me get to him, mum, I know something about gunshot wounds. Meanwhile, Bill, you cut away as fast as you can go to old Mrs. Willans' at the 'Load of Hay,' and get some brandy and tell her to get a bed ready. Lucky it ain't far."

The fisherman scratched his head dubiously. "Nice thing 'f Oi was t' run up agin that there loony on the way," he remonstrated.

"Don't you be afraid of him. He's two mile off by this time. He went off like a racing-cutter, he did."

Think, if there'd been any chance of coming up with him, I'd be here now? Cut away now, do, unless you want to have this gen'leman's death at your door."

Realising that the moment was not one for argument, the fisherman did as he was bid, making his way rapidly across the fields. Meanwhile the coastguard, with Stephen's assistance, examined the wound and roughly bandaged it. It was in the left side, though fortunately some way from the heart. "He'll do for the present," he dogmatised cheerfully. "Don't you take on, mum. Gentl'eman's not in any danger. Next thing's to get him to bed and get a doctor to him. They'll make him comfortable at Mrs. Willans'. Now then, sir. Feel as if you could walk a bit?"

It appearing upon examination that John Blaicklock, although conscious, was quite unable to do so much as think of walking, the coastguard, whose cheerfulness and pleasant bearded face were almost as helpful as his quick command of the situation, detailed Stephen to find a hurdle. A short search along the meadows discovered one. Covering it with Delia's cloak and Stephen's overcoat, they improvised a sufficiently practicable stretcher. Very carefully the two men lifted the sufferer, now fast verging towards unconsciousness, upon it, and bore him as quickly as the treacherous light would allow, across the flats, in the direction already taken by the fisherman. Delia, who was quite unnerved by the suddenness of the tragedy, walked beside her husband's head, doing what little she might to alleviate his sufferings when the roughness of the ground made jolting of the stretcher unavoidable.

Shortly after passing the railway-line, which here

skirts the coast, they were met by the fisherman, who had impressed a couple of his fellows into the service. Stephen and his companion were relieved of their burden, and the little procession proceeded at a faster pace towards the inn, the lighted windows of which shone hospitably through the gloom some hundred yards ahead. They passed through a gate, and so into a made road, where the coastguard left them to report the affair to his superiors and take steps for the apprehension of the would-be murderer.

From the fisherman Stephen learned some brief particulars of their providential incidence. Manwell had first presented himself to them upon the outskirts of Newhaven, as they were leaving the town in the direction of Bishopstonæ. He had asked to be directed to the sea-front, and had been very anxious to know whether a lady and gentleman had passed along that way recently. His manner had been so excited and his whole appearance so singular, considering the time and place, that the coastguard had determined to keep him under observation, thinking it not impossible that he might be contemplating suicide. Following him at some little distance, without themselves being seen, they had become more and more convinced, from his gesticulations, that they had to do with a madman, and when, later, they had seen the three figures of Stephen and the Blacklocks on the sea-wall in the moonlight, and had time to realise that Manwell was obviously tracking them, concealing himself in the shadow, they had hesitated no longer, and had so arrived upon the scene in the nick of time.

A doctor had been already summoned, and was awaiting them at the inn. The landlady had given up

her bedroom—the only one at all suitable, for the house was little more than a village beershop—and within a few minutes John Blacklock was put to bed and his wound professionally examined and reported upon. It proved to be less dangerous than they had feared. The revolver had been little more than a toy, though not the less capable of inflicting serious damage, fired at such close range. The bullet had struck a rib and glanced aside, missing any vital organ, though causing serious loss of blood. The doctor extracted it without difficulty, and having cleaned and bandaged the wound, handed the patient over to the care of Delia, until he should return in the morning. Stephen had awaited the verdict in the landlady's private snuggery, meanwhile preparing a plausible story against the inevitable questioning he must expect. His first thought was to remain in the inn for the night, but there proved to be no accommodation, nor could he hear of any in the neighbourhood. Delia did not reappear, and, feeling that his presence could only be irksome to her, he made up his mind, on hearing that John was in no danger, to walk back to Newhaven. He left a message that he would return early upon the morrow, and so departed, running the gauntlet of the labourers and fishermen who had congregated round the door, though it was fortunately past closing-time. He was not destined to escape the attentions of the local constable, who, arriving at the inn a few minutes after Stephen had left it, followed him at once. To him Stephen gave the baldest version of the facts: that Mr. and Mrs. Blacklock and himself had arrived that evening from London; that, tempted by the beauty of the evening, they had gone for a

stroll along the sea-front ; that they had been suddenly attacked, and that none of them could throw any light upon either the personality or the motive of their assailant.

With the unpleasant possibilities of the affair and its after-effects already beginning to formulate themselves in his imagination, Stephen did not feel himself called upon to make the personalities of its actors unduly recognisable, so far as it might be possible to avoid it. Thus it was that the constable's note-book, when subsequently produced to his inspector, set forth that the name of the wounded man was Blakey, and that of his friend and companion, Carroll—deviations from the actual facts which were, considering everything, not unnatural.

The worthy crime-specialist expressed few doubts as to the real significance of the outrage. He was very strongly of opinion that robbery was meant, and that there "were a lot of very queer customers about these times," to which Stephen agreed. Delighted with the important variation upon his ordinary hum-drum duties which Fate had thrown in his way, the officer, having learned all that Stephen could tell him, next proposed to go back to the inn and cross-examine Delia and her husband. Stephen, understanding that the bucolic mind, especially if it be clothed with a little brief authority, will not brook contradiction, agreed with him in principle. He deftly suggested, however, making it appear that the idea originated with the policeman rather than with himself, that the lady was very much upset, that such an intelligent officer knew what women were, and that it might be in the interests of her coherency if her examination were de-

ferred until the morrow ; while her husband, being still unconscious, could certainly not be approached until then.

This being agreed, they parted with mutual expressions of esteem. Stephen made the best of his way into Newhaven, where, after some little difficulty, owing to the lateness of the hour, he obtained a bed. He gave up any idea of grappling, mentally, with the new situation. It certainly seemed as if Fate had changed her mind at the last moment and had chosen a drastic means of putting her new intentions into execution. But he would know more about it in the morning ; for the present, he was tired—dog-tired, in mind and body.

News of any kind travels fast in country districts. Early as Stephen rose, he was not early enough to escape a police-inspector and two reporters in search of copy for local papers. To them, feeling that it was now quite hopeless to attempt any actual hushing-up of the matter, he gave a similar version of the facts, slightly elaborated, to that which he had detailed to the constable overnight. Mr. and Mrs. Blackey were his most intimate friends ; they had been seized with a sudden longing for the sea-air, and had come down to Newhaven meaning to spend the week-end ; none of them had the remotest idea why they had been attacked or by whom. Personally he thought it must have been an escaped lunatic, for the man had shouted something which sounded like gibberish. No doubt he would be caught soon, when they might know more about it. His own impression of the assailant had been of a short, rather stout man, with a reddish beard, probably a foreigner ; but the whole thing had taken

only a few seconds, moonlight was proverbially treacherous, and he might easily have been mistaken.

As he made his way towards John's temporary resting-place, his mind began to work more freely again, to its own torment. First of all, it struck him that there was uncommonly little chance that Manwell would escape undetected. Such a figure as he presented must excite suspicion wherever he went. If he was caught there must inevitably be a hideous scandal, for he could scarcely be expected to hold his tongue in court. It might be possible, with John Blaicklock's assistance, to impress upon the public mind that Manwell had all along been under the influence of delusions. Stephen almost smiled as he reflected that the young man's voracious novel-reading would probably be held to have brought about his disordered intellect, and wondered how the well-known writers whom he most favoured would like being accused, in long black head-lines, of having driven a young man to lunacy. He grew grave again as he considered how impossible it would be for him to expect John Blaicklock's assistance in any such justifiable perjury. This brought him to the whole question of the interrupted elopement. Supposing even that Manwell was not caught, that all scandal was avoided, how did matters stand? What had Delia been thinking all night as she watched beside her husband's bed? Certainly the whole thing must be dropped until Blaicklock was recovered from his hurt. And afterwards? Did Delia decide to remain with her husband—as he felt was most probable, considering everything, as he realised, dimly, was inevitable—what was he to do? His mind had been, ever since the scene in the studio, so singly

directed towards one end, that he found it difficult, almost impossible, to reason clearly around the new chain of circumstances. How did he stand towards Claire Stanmore? It might be possible to keep her in ignorance of everything. Yes, but that was out of the question. He had still some shreds of self-respect. As he walked onwards through the fresh salt morning air, his brain toiled round and round a vicious circle. He could reason nothing clearly; everything was vague, conditional. He must wait.

A crowd was already collected around the doors of the inn when he reached it. He learned that John was considerably better, though still weak from loss of blood; that the doctor had seen him again and had said that everything was going on well and that he might be taken home in something under a week. Would the gentleman like to go upstairs at once?

He felt that his presence in the sick-room might seem almost an insult. Yet he must see Delia. He asked for a piece of paper and wrote a hasty note, recounting the story he had told of the events which led up to the shooting, in order that there might be no discrepancy in their statements, and asking if she would come down and speak to him for a few moments. Almost at once her reply was brought to him. It was short and very much to the point. "He needs me. I shall never see you again. Good-bye, my dear, dear love, for ever." It was scribbled, almost illegibly, in pencil—he could scarcely recognise the handwriting. She must have passed a night of torture; even the pathetic little suggestion of melodrama in the wording of her last farewell showed that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

HE found there was a train which brought him to Victoria at a quarter to one. It would give him just time to drive to the studio and change, before lunching at Eaton Square. He would keep that appointment with Claire. He must make the opportunity to speak to her alone and tell her everything. In any case, their engagement must be at an end.

He found everything quiet in Rodney Street. Adam, who was used to his master's erratic habits, expressed no surprise at his prolonged absence. A young lady had called early that morning, asking for Mr. Cartmel's address, and whether Adam knew if Mr. and Mrs. Blacklock were with him. It must, of course, have been Carrie Reynolds. No doubt they were very anxious. He must relieve their minds, even if it made him late for lunch. He sat down and wrote a hasty note to Carrie, telling much the same story as he had told to the policeman. Then he tore it up. It would seem to them so extraordinary that he had not remained with his wounded friend. No doubt, also, Delia would have written, or would write. He was tired of telling lies. He dressed and went out, instructing Adam to say, should the young lady call again, that his master was not yet back from the country.

On his way to Eaton Square it occurred to him to buy an evening paper. It was the earliest edition, but it had a short account of what it described as a "Dar-

ing attempt at Robbery at a Sea-side Resort"! It gave the names of the victims of the attempt as Mr. and Mrs. Blackworth and Mr. Caromel, and followed his own version of the facts. It would have suggested nothing to the Stanmores even had they read it. At least he would be saved the necessity of prefixing his confession to Claire with an assortment of lies to her father and stepmother.

He was no more unpunctual than was usual with him. As he expected, there was no need for any reference to his trip to Newhaven during lunch, which passed without incident, though Claire found reason to rally her fiancé on his pre-occupation. She would understand it later in the day, he reflected.

It seemed, from the mysterious smiles which Claire and her father interchanged at intervals, that they were also holding something back. He had entirely forgotten Lady Stanmore's last words at parting on the previous day, and was accordingly surprised when he was asked, as soon as the meal was over, if he would mind going for a little walk. He acquiesced, though without enthusiasm, and it was not until they reached their destination, in one of the streets leading from Belgrave Square, that he had any inkling of the purpose of the walk. Then he wished devoutly that he had not come.

It was a charming house—not very large, though giving ample accommodation for the most exacting of newly married couples. It was provided with a handsome studio, newly erected, and upon it everything had been lavished that the purse of Sir James could provide or the wit of his daughter suggest as likely to appeal to Stephen.

342 THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT

He approved of everything—he could do no less—with as much enthusiasm as he could assume, enduring agonies, meanwhile, from the cruel mockery of it all. He was, strive as he might, so unlike his usual gay self, that Sir James took it into his head that he was sickening for influenza, while Claire concluded that his pride was wounded by this advance-advertising of the wealth she was to bring to him, and bitterly repented her precipitancy and lack of taste.

The moment for his bitterest ordeal came soon after their return to the paternal home, Sir John and his wife finding the usual urgent reasons for departure.

“It is getting very soon now, dearest,” began Claire, as an appropriate introduction to their love-making. “You may come and sit by me on the sofa if you are very good.”

“I would rather stand for a little, Claire. I have something that I must say to you.”

His face was so grave that she could not help but realise he was in deadly earnest. She turned pale.

“It isn’t—anything——?”

“Yes. It has to do with our marriage. I have come—to ask you to release me from our engagement.”

She flinched as though he had struck her. “I—I don’t understand. You aren’t serious—Stephen? You don’t mean it?”

“It is the only thing to be done. It is the only—reparation I can make to you. You will agree—when you have heard what I am going to tell you.”

“I—I don’t want to hear. It only means, I suppose, that you have changed your mind. That you don’t love me any more. Is that it?”

“No, Claire, it isn’t that. And—I’m afraid you

must hear it, though God knows, I don't want to tell you. But you couldn't understand—you couldn't believe, if I didn't tell you—everything.”

And he told her—everything. He traced the whole story of his entanglement with Delia Blacklock, from the beginning; he did not spare himself—or her—the incident at the theatre—and as she heard it she flinched again, as though she suffered physically; the long series of clandestine meetings, the discovery at the studio, Delia's return and their project for elopement, finally the interview with John Blacklock on the seawall and the irruption of Mr. Manwell. He told his story as well as it could be told, taking the whole blame upon himself, yet without hysterical self-condemnation.

When he had finished there was a long silence, while Claire, her eyes full of wondering horror, tried to take in the full meaning of his words. When at last she spoke, her first utterance was characteristic of her.

“Then all this time—you poor, poor boy!—how you must have suffered!”

Again, a few minutes later: “Mr. Blacklock—he must be a very noble man.”

He wished she would cry, that it might relieve her, but her brain seemed numbed, so that it was only little by little that realisation came to her.

She said only one sentence that might be taken as blaming him, and it was the only word of blame he ever heard from her lips. “Why did you do it, Stephen? How could you do it?”

It was only now, when he had lost her, that his eyes were open to the full extent of his love for her, and how it differed, in quality and degree, from his passion

for Delia. Well, he had made his bed and he must lie upon it with what dignity he might.

"Will you—can you say you forgive me, Claire? Before I go."

"Forgive you!" There was something in the hopelessness of her laugh that made him flinch in turn. He waited, but she was still, it seemed to him, half-stunned by the suddenness of the blow.

"I am glad—you told me, yourself. It would have been terrible to have found it out. Even more terrible not to have known."

"There is no excuse for me in that. I should not have told you—only—I had to."

"Poor Stephen! Poor, poor Stephen!"

'At least he was being punished as he deserved.

"You must have loved—you must love her very dearly."

"You don't understand. I could never explain it to you. It's the result of having the artistic temperament, I suppose." His laugh was bitterer far than hers had been.

"I have seen—her portrait. She is very beautiful. Much more so than—— Stephen, we must never let my father know of this. Nor Margaret. They could never understand. I cannot myself, yet. Some day I think perhaps I shall be able to."

"Will you let me go now, Claire?"

"No—no. Stay. I want to think—I must think."

His mind was become a blank, so that he fell to counting the ticking of the great clock in the room adjoining.

"Didn't you ever love me, Stephen? Was it all—all make-believe?"

"I loved you all the time. I love you now, more than ever I did. It sounds like a lie—but it is true. Only—I can't hope to make you understand. I can't understand, myself."

"I suppose she must have been unhappy. It would have been too wicked—too horrible, otherwise. And yet she is going back to him. I cannot—I cannot—it doesn't seem as if—it could be possible."

Once again he fell to counting the tickings of the clock. In time his imagination fitted them with a grotesque wording. "Too—late. Too—late. Too—late. Too—late." Then, as his ear accustomed itself to catch softer half-strokes: "You have—done it—my boy. You have—done it—my boy. You have—done it—my boy. You have—done it—my boy." A cinder fell noisily from the fire and the interruption brought back the old refrain: "Too—late. Too—late. Too—late. Too—late."

"And now, you want to break off our engagement?"

"I don't want to. You do not understand—if you think that. But it is the only thing to be done. I could not subject you to such a risk." As he spoke he realised, too late to change the form of his sentence, where he had heard it last.

"To such a risk?"

"Of marrying a man with such a character as I have shown mine to be."

"Not even if I loved him?"

"That would only make the risk the greater."

"I see. Yes. Of course."

The clock began to speak to him again. This time there was more of menace in its adjuration. "Damn—

fool!" it seemed to say: "Damn—fool! Damn—fool! Damn—fool!"

It was perhaps ten minutes before she came to her conclusion. "I am not going to release you, Stephen. At least, not at once. I must have time to think about it. We both must. I don't seem to be able to see anything—clearly—to-night. I feel as if—as if there was no ground under my feet. It is still two months to the time—when our wedding—was to have been. You must go away for a month. At the end of that time, I shall be able to see things—to understand better. And you will have had time to know—to be sure of what you feel about it all. I will write to you in a month—and tell you what I have decided. Do you agree to that?"

He had no time to say more than "Yes," when Lady Stanmore entered the room. "I am sorry to have disturbed your philosophic discussions, but your father wants to speak to Stephen in the library. Don't be alarmed, I believe it is only to discuss whether Liberty or Morris are the more eligible decorators. Why, Claire, how white you are! Is anything—you are not feeling faint?"

"Faint? What ever put that into your head? It is only the colour from that green lamp-shade. It always makes one look perfectly ghastly." She smiled naturally at Stephen, who was hesitating as to what he ought to do. "Don't keep my father waiting, Stephen. And mind you impress upon him that we both of us positively hate patterns on the wall-papers."

On his way homewards Stephen bought all the evening papers he could lay his hands on. Nothing had yet been heard of the supposed lunatic. The wounded

man—they had got the name right at last—was out of danger. Mr. Caromel had now become Mr. Cardwell in one paper and Mr. Carthew in another; a third, more daring, suggested that he was possibly the well-known painter, Mr. Stephen Cartmel. An opposition organ drew the moral that under a Liberal Government the security of life and property was an unattainable ideal in this country. Another, seizing with avidity upon the theory that the aggressor had been a foreigner, called loudly for a more rigorous extension of the Aliens Act.

It happened to be rather a slack time for the newspapers, so far as events of public interest were concerned, and they made the most of this heaven-sent crime. The failure to track down the criminal filled many columns with caustic comment on the incapacity of the police; the theory that the act was that of an escaped lunatic provided room for endless strictures upon the maladministration of county and other asylums; an enterprising ha'penny daily organised a detective expedition on its own account, chiefly in order to show the detective force how badly it understood its own business, incidentally to bring the would-be murderer to justice. Incidentally, also, when Stephen's identity with one of the victims of the attack became fully established, the press decided that he must become a popular hero. He was accused of having behaved with distinguished bravery; of having single-handed put the desperado to flight when he had already wounded one man and routed a posse of county policemen. For nine days, or thereabouts, Stephen's name was on every lip; his photograph was published, with the inscription, "The heroic artist," in fourteen

illustrated papers of one kind and another; he received eleven separate commissions as a direct result thereof. A firm of picture-dealers, who had some of his paintings among their stock, deftly brought about a spontaneous suggestion, put forward by "A lover of British Pluck" in a letter to *The Daily Mail*, that one of them should be purchased by national subscription and presented to the National Gallery as a memorial, for all time, of Mr. Cartmel's self-sacrificing heroism. *The Daily Express* thereupon came out with a rival suggestion, according to precedent, that Mr. Cartmel should be presented, always by public subscription, with a golden laurel-wreath, bearing the inscription, "Greater love can no man show than that he give his life for his friend." In discussing the rival schemes the London press published in all thirty-seven leading articles, in twenty-four of which the moral was enforced that the Artistic Temperament could alone endow a man with the truest heroism—that which comes from the soul. On the third day of the boom a peculiarly brutal "pogrom" occurred in Southern Russia, in the course of which some 3,000 Jews were massacred or pillaged. This was not of sufficient public interest to detract from the attention paid to the "Newhaven Outrage," and it was not until, on the tenth day, three members of a popular football team were suspended for unfair play during a League match, that sub-editors felt justified in deposing the "Seaside Sensation" and "The Cartmel Testimonial" from their pride of place among the most important news-columns and using them as "fill-up" matter in inconspicuous pages.

Stephen was spared the knowledge of all this. Upon

the evening of his parting from Claire he once more packed his kit-bag and left London. He made for Cornwall, hoping to run across Bodman, but, missing him, took up his quarters in a lonely village some miles from Penzance. There he remained for a month, doing little work, passing his time between reading the lightest of light fiction, endeavouring to forget the past and making unending good resolutions for the future. He had plenty of food for unpleasant thought. Not only was there the anticipation of Claire's final decision. He was tortured with the desire to know how it had fared with Delia and her husband. There was Manwell, again. If he should be caught and brought to trial, there was the inevitable scandal to be faced. It would be impossible to keep it from Sir James, whose verdict upon the facts was a foregone conclusion. And with half England ringing with his exploit it seemed impossible that Manwell could escape. If not, not only must Stephen resign himself to losing his wife—to say nothing of Delia—but his career, so far as the public side of it was concerned, would be as good as ended. Long before the month was at an end it had been indelibly impressed upon the mind of Stephen that the lot of transgressors is hard—unjustly so, he grew inclined to think.

As it so happened, nothing more was ever seen of the unfortunate ex-clerk. The coast and the neighbouring district for miles inland were rigorously searched, but, from the moment when he fired the second shot, Mr. Manwell disappeared absolutely from mortal ken. It was generally surmised that he had thrown himself into the sea and that the body had been carried out with the ebbing tide. Attempts by the au-

thorities to find some clue to the criminal's identity or motive were equally unsuccessful. It was supposed that he might have travelled down from London by the night-train, but none of the railway officials had noticed any one answering to his description. He could have had no relations or intimates; no inquiries were ever made as to his whereabouts. Save for the indisputable evidence of the revolver bullet it was as though he had never been.

Time cures all wounds, even those inflicted on a young man's self-esteem. As the long days passed Stephen's agonies grew imperceptibly less acute; the folly of his conduct usurped in his imagination the pride of place hitherto given to its turpitude; gratitude for his apparent escape mingled with his fears and almost drowned his self-abasement. He had certainly forfeited all right to Claire's love; if only she should decide to give him the opportunity he began to feel it not impossible that he might deserve it in the future. If only he could hear from her.

Punctually on the last day of the month her letter came. His hands trembled as he opened the envelope. If she failed him—— She had written only one word, "Come."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A WEEK before Stephen's marriage he passed John Blaicklock in the street, and turned hurriedly aside lest he should be recognised. For a long time he preserved Delia's last short note, keeping it in the innermost pocket of his letter-case. As the months passed, it grew to be crumpled and soiled, and its pencil-lettering quite illegible. One day, as he was turning over some old letters, which he had kept only because he had not remembered to destroy them—memoranda of addresses, bills that had long since been paid and so forth—he came upon it. He looked at it, but it suggested nothing to him, and he cast it into the waste-paper basket with the rest.

It was nearly ten years before he heard any definite tidings of the Blaicklocks. They came through Mr. Jennings. Mr. Jennings had prospered exceedingly. Ever since the day that Stephen had interceded for him with Sir James Stanmore, fortune had favoured him. One rash speculation after another had turned out favourably. Mr. Groschen very soon killed himself with drink; Mr. Jennings, being of tougher stamina, seemed to thrive on it. He called one day upon Stephen, to offer him the commission of painting the portrait of Mrs. Jennings and her younger son Adolphus. At that time Mr. Jennings, having become a representative of British High Finance, was standing for Parliament. He had wisely chosen a seaside

resort in the south of England as the constituency most likely to respond to his wooing, which took the same form as that by which Jupiter courted Danaë. His opponents routed out certain facts in his past history which were not altogether creditable, but, as his election agent happily expressed it, "there was no need for a gentleman of Mr. Jennings' standing to condescend so far as to refute such worthless mendacities." Mr. Jennings accordingly treated them with silent contempt and treated the "free and independent" to anything they asked him for. They responded by electing him with a record majority. His opponent petitioned, under the Corrupt Practices Act, but Mr. Jennings was again fortunate, in his judge, and emerged triumphantly, to take his seat, amid the cheers of his party, as a representative member of the British Parliament.

From him Stephen learned that John Blacklock, some six months after the Newhaven outrage, had sold his business to a limited liability company and had gone abroad with his wife. Mr. Jennings understood that they had lived a nomadic life for some time on the Continent, and had then visited Australia. On the return journey—that is to say about three years after her last meeting with Stephen—Mrs. Blacklock had died, of a decline, Mr. Jennings understood, and had been buried at sea. Since that time he had heard nothing of or from her husband.

It happened that Stephen was to attend, that evening, a semi-public banquet, offered him by a number of friends in celebration of his election to the full honours of a Royal Academician—he having already been an Associate for nearly seven years. It was observed that

he was unusually silent during the whole course of the proceedings and that, when called upon to reply to the toast of his health, he faltered and, after a few almost incoherent words of thanks, sat down. Already famous as among the most felicitous of after-dinner speakers, his break-down was attributed to the strong emotion natural to him under such circumstances, and as doing the more credit to his keen sensibilities. It was nearly three days before he became his usual radiant self once more.

Sir James Stanmore lived long enough to see his son-in-law with his feet upon the steps of the Presidency, and to hear his eldest grandson acclaimed by admiring friends an "infant prodigy," as is almost invariably the case with the children of Royal Academicians. He had but once even the slightest disagreement with Stephen—when he expressed a strong conviction that the younger man was carrying modesty almost to absurdity in concealing, to the best of his ability, his connection with the "Newhaven Outrage," when, as the old gentleman would frequently and proudly recall, he had behaved according to the best traditions of an Englishman.

Claire made Stephen an excellent and devoted wife, and found in him an excellent and devoted husband. No small part of this was due to the strength of her own character, and to her ability in concealing it. Her husband followed her in all things, being all the time under the firm impression that he was taking the lead. Little by little he imbibed her views on life, so that, although he never altogether lost his old gaiety of manner, he came to take his responsibilities as seriously as even Claire could desire. Her influence

extended into his professional, no less than his private life. She it was who little by little modified the individuality of his artistic aims and methods, who reconciled him to the Royal Academy, who piloted him through the various stages of Associate, Academician, and President, who obtained for him the baronetcy which crowned his professional honours, who instilled into his pictures all the qualities most typical of the Academic convention, and always without his having the remotest suspicion that she had any hand in it.

Sir Stephen Cartmel was universally acknowledged to be an ideal P.R.A. His tact became almost proverbial; his manner was charming in its courtly dignity; he was an excellent administrator. Even his appearance threw an added grace of ideality around his tenancy of the high office. He had grown somewhat stout with advancing years, sufficiently so to render his figure the more commanding. The silvery beauty of his hair was wont to throw young lady students into ecstasies of hero-worship; his short and carefully tended grey beard gave to his face an added manliness; his broad, flowing ties furnished the dictionary of fashion with a new name, so that for at least a year no young man who aspired to be considered cultured was seen in public wearing any other than the "Cartmel" tie. As an enthusiastic reporter observed, upon the occasion of his driving to Buckingham Palace, in his official uniform, to kiss hands at the King's Birthday levée, he looked "a born leader, at once of the aristocracies of Nature, of Art, and of Intellect."

As a public speaker, especially upon subjects connected with the advancement of Art in this country,

Sir Stephen Cartmel obtained a great and deserved reputation. His lectures upon "Art and Ideality," when republished in book form, obtained a higher sale than any hitherto recorded for a similar work. The most widely quoted passage was one in which he referred to the Artistic Temperament. Its closing sentences ran as follows: "I will go further, and say that the man who possesses the Artistic Temperament is, by that very fact, incapable of a crime against the beautiful, spiritual or material; is incapable of a mean, or petty, or dishonourable action; is incapable, in a word, of any action contrary in spirit to all that we imply when we speak of a gentleman, and—if I may say so without seeming to imply anything derogatory to our sister nations—of an English gentleman par excellence."

THE END.



